



# Organizing for Improvement in an Urban School District: Shifting From a Culture of Compliance to a Culture of Collective Responsibility

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Organizing for Improvement in an Urban School District:  
Shifting from a Culture of Compliance to a Culture of Collective Responsibility

Submitted by  
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To the Harvard Graduate School of Education  
in partial fulfillment of the graduation requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education Leadership

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Dedicated to Mom and Dad

My first teachers.

All I have is possible because of the unconditional love and faith you have in me.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## **ABSTRACT**

There is high demand for understanding the ways in which a central office can best support school improvement and student growth. This capstone examines how a cross-functional senior leadership team collaborated to design a district-wide school improvement planning process with the goal of improving the quality of teaching and learning for all students. In particular, the analysis focuses on the functions of teaming and strategic improvement planning as drivers to help an organization achieve its goals. In 2009, New Haven Public Schools (NHPS) introduced School Change, its strategic plan, as part of a broad-based district reform strategy. In fall 2014, the district launched School Change 2.0 to deepen and extend the focus of School Change. School Change 2.0 was organized around five key pillars: Academic Learning Systems, Talent, Portfolio of Schools Support, Community Partnerships, and Strategic Infrastructure Systems. Through a series of discussions, the district's senior leadership team identified key components and initiatives within each of these priority areas. After identification of the key initiatives, a structure was established for district meetings to monitor these initiatives.

Within the Portfolio of Schools Support pillar, one key initiative was the redesign of the district's school improvement planning process. With the launch of School Change 2.0, the senior leadership team recognized the need to strengthen communication and coordination among departments and individuals. District leadership acknowledged that deep silos existed within the organization, which often resulted in work being done in isolation and sometimes at cross-purposes. As Garth Harries entered his second year as superintendent, he continued to reinforce a focus on collective responsibility and a desire to strengthen NHPS's ability to be a learning organization. This capstone explores the district's shift toward a culture of collective responsibility through cross-departmental teaming and addresses this research question: How can

an urban school district use school improvement planning to enhance cross-functional work within the central office, and the partnership between the central office and schools, to improve teaching and learning?

This capstone provides insight into how an urban school district and public bureaucracy can structure its internal systems and processes to create a culture that enables continuous improvement. This is of practical importance given the recent focus on how central offices can be transformed to strengthen performance and help all students realize ambitious learning goals. The process requires shifting from a culture traditionally focused on business and compliance functions to a culture oriented toward supporting schools and efforts to improve teaching and learning. To do this, district leaders must find new ways of working together and working with schools. In particular, the central office must shift from simply "organizing to execute" to also "organizing to learn." This capstone focuses on the possibilities and limitations of this process, and provides practical recommendations for making this transition in a context like NHPS.

The Review of Knowledge for Action section details key principles of effective school improvement planning, teaming, strategy execution, and central office transformation. The Analysis section describes the ways in which the organization integrated or failed to integrate these key principles as it designed and implemented a strategy to improve schools. The Implications section details important aspects of effective strategic planning and execution to support school improvement in an urban school district. In particular, it discusses the role of feedback loops, cycles of inquiry, and relational trust. The capstone concludes with an acknowledgement of the complexity of shifting the culture of an organization toward continuous learning and improvement, particularly an organization that operates within an uncertain and unsettled political and social environment.

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **BACKGROUND: NEW HAVEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

In 2009, the city of New Haven and New Haven Public Schools (NHPS) adopted a comprehensive K-12 school reform effort called the School Change Initiative (hereafter known as School Change or School Change 1.0) aimed at improving schooling for the approximately 20,000 students in the district. Conceived as “an exciting school reform initiative,” it gained national recognition for its innovative and collaborative approach to improving schools and student outcomes (New Haven Public Schools, 2014). The long-term goal of School Change was “[t]o give our students the best education possible so they can pursue their dreams and achieve success in college, career and life.” School Change was designed to be implemented in stages over a five-year period with the 2010-2011 school year being the official launch of the reform (Gonzalez et al., 2014).

In its original conception, School Change was organized into four pillars of action—Students, Talent, Portfolio of Schools, and Community and Parent Engagement—and had three primary reform-level goals:

- Eliminate the achievement gap, bringing NHPS students in line with state averages on the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) and Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) within five years.
- Cut the high school dropout rate in half.
- Ensure that every graduating student has the academic ability and the financial resources to attend and succeed in college.

Upon my arrival in June 2014, NHPS was entering its fifth year of the strategy implementation and facing a moment of important transition.



## NHPS: A TIME OF TRANSITION

In July 2013, Garth Harries, a chief architect of School Change and an assistant superintendent in the district since March 2009, was appointed superintendent of NHPS. He assumed the position after the retirement of Dr. Reginald Mayo, who had held the position of superintendent for twenty-one years. Four months after the Harries appointment, the city of New Haven elected Toni Harp as its first African-American female mayor. Harp stepped into the role after the retirement of John DeStefano, Jr., who had been mayor for twenty years.

During the first week in his new role, Superintendent Harries said, “I’m a different kind of leader. I want to be a leader that empowers decision-making in the organization more. For me, that’s how you get people to rise and develop” (Bailey, 2013a). Within his first few months as superintendent, Harries conducted a listening tour that resulted in a "Listening Tour Report" and a letter to the New Haven Board of Education, NHPS staff, and the New Haven community published in March 2014. The report and letter reaffirmed NHPS’s vision, areas of strength, and areas for growth aligned with the four pillars of School Change. The documents also highlighted two core principles that reverberated in conversations throughout the superintendent’s listening tour: responsibility and preparation. Concerning the core principle of responsibility, Harries wrote:

Responsibility is neither exclusive, nor blame-oriented, and I think of it as a bottom-up concept, rather than something imposed from the outside. Students must be responsible for their own learning. Parents must be responsible for supporting their children. Educators must be responsible for creating good learning experiences; leaders must be responsible for organizing and mobilizing educators; and the district must be responsible for organizing and supporting schools. Responsibility means we are taking accountability for and are committed to our students’ success, not having that imposed on us. Responsibility also depends on teamwork and support (Harries, 2014).

On the core principle of preparation, Harries had this to say:

[It is] the idea that education is a process to prepare students for what comes next in life. Education must be about more than proficiency. Education is mastery in preparation to take on greater challenges at the next level (Harries, 2014).

Throughout my time as resident at NHPS, Superintendent Harries frequently echoed both of these core principles in verbal and written communications. Shifting the organization, especially the central office, toward an orientation of collective responsibility and continuous learning underlies many of the successes and challenges of the strategic project described and analyzed in this capstone.

In August 2014, shortly before the start of the 2014-2015 school year, the district released an updated document outlining the vision of School Change (now referred to as School Change 2.0) and reframing the district's goals. The document was triggered, in part, by the desire of the school board and the communities at large for greater clarity about the superintendent's vision and strategic plan for NHPS. The updated vision and goals document released by the district stated:

The vision [of NHPS] is to build a system of great schools that empower students to achieve success in college, career, and life. The path to get there includes the facilitation of purposeful, supportive, and meaningful learning experiences. In crafting those learning experiences, NHPS will strive to nurture the whole child - academic learning, social-emotional growth, and physical health - that enable students and schools to rise.

The document reframed how progress would be measured and set the following goals for School Change (District Goals, Visions, and Strategy, 2014):

- Every student should launch from NHPS to success in college, career, and life: Over the next five years, we will strive to increase successful enrollment in a confirmed post-secondary (i.e. after high school) education, so that second year college enrollment rises to 50% of our cohort, and with two thirds of our cohort successfully and on-track into college, the military, or a confirmed employment apprenticeship.
- Every student must graduate from High School: over the next five years, we will strive to raise the 4 year graduation rate still further to 85%, and with 95% of students earning a High School diploma or a GED within 6 years.

- At every stage of K12 Education, students should be prepared for success at the next level: functional reading by the end of first grade; grade-level reading, writing, and math at the end of middle school; high school transcripts that reflect on-track mastery of core course subjects; and post-secondary readiness on standardized assessments, including the PSAT/SAT and other instruments.

In 2014, with an updated School Change vision and goals document, School Change 1.0 entering its fifth year of implementation, and the first year under new superintendent leadership, NHPS needed to reevaluate and refresh aspects of the district's strategy based on results to date. NHPS had demonstrated momentum and positive impact under School Change 1.0. Since 2009, the graduation rate had risen by 17% to 75% and the dropout rate decreased by 12.4% to 19.3%. Students in the lowest-performing schools showed the largest gains in test scores, college enrollment for all students slightly increased on average, and dropout rates in the lowest-performing schools improved and were on par with dropout rates in districts across Connecticut with similar socio-demographic and achievement profiles. However, there was still room for improvement. In particular:

- While the performance gap had narrowed over the five years of School Change 1.0, in 2013 there was an 18.3% performance gap between the state average and the number of NHPS students demonstrating “Proficiency” or better on the CMT<sup>1</sup> and a 25.9% performance gap between the state average and the number of students meeting “Goal.”
- Only one-third of NHPS graduates obtained the minimum grade point average of 3.0 to be eligible for a New Haven Promise scholarship.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The state of Connecticut stopped administering the CMT as of 2013 as the state transitioned to Smarter Balanced, a state exam aligned to the Common Core State Standards.

<sup>2</sup> New Haven Promise, established in 2010, is a scholarship program that complements the School Change reform. Although it is not an NHPS central office program, the district places New Haven Promise under the community and parent engagement pillar as an important effort to

- In a study published by the RAND Corporation on the impact of the New Haven Promise program, scholarship recipients interviewed in focus groups said they did not feel fully prepared for college-level coursework, even after School Change 1.0 was enacted. Students specifically mentioned struggling with study skills, time management, and self-discipline.

While School Change 1.0 focused on establishing urgency and the structures and collaboration necessary for reform, School Change 2.0 focused on deepening and extending these efforts, and reevaluating the ways in which the central office was organized to support school improvement. Building upon the original four pillars of action outlined in 2009, NHPS started the 2014-2015 school year organized around five rearticulated pillars of action designed to work together to support school and district effectiveness (Figure 1). These pillars of School Change 2.0 were now stated as follows:

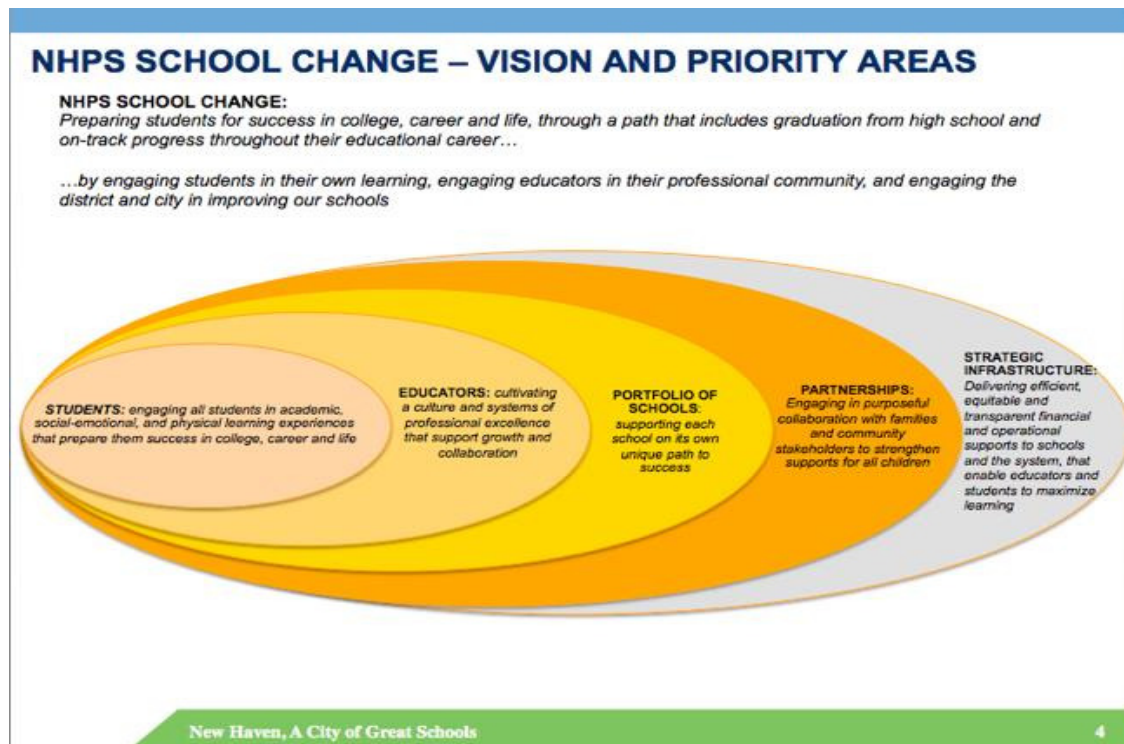
- **Academic Learning Systems** – Engage \*all\* students in purposeful, supportive, and meaningful learning experiences that coherently support and challenge students to academic, social-emotional, and physical development through instructional systems that tie together curriculum, instruction, interventions, and assessments.
- **Talent** – Attract, develop, recognize, and retain talented educators of all kinds (including high quality teachers, school leaders, district leaders, and supporting school staff) by cultivating a culture and systems of professional excellence that support growth and collaboration.
- **Portfolio of Schools Support** – Support each school on its own unique path to success by encouraging the development of high quality school teams, providing appropriate and equitable supports to schools, and enabling effective decision-making at the school level.
- **Community Partnerships** – Engage in purposeful collaboration with families and

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support district students. A Promise scholarship covers up to full tuition for New Haven residents graduating from NHPS or city charter high schools to attend Connecticut public colleges and universities or up to \$2,500 annually to attend in-state Connecticut private nonprofit colleges and universities (Gonzalez et al., 2014).

community stakeholders to strengthen supports for all children in each school.

- **Strategic Infrastructure Systems**<sup>3</sup> – Deliver financial, operational, and other supports to schools and the system as a whole that are efficient, equitable, and transparent so that educators and students can maximize learning.



**Figure 1: NHPS School Change Vision and Priority Areas**

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

<sup>3</sup> Strategic Infrastructure Systems was a new pillar added to the framework in School Change 2.0. This addition was prompted, in part, as the district attempted to move toward more integrated and seamless support for schools. School Change 2.0 also articulated equity as a core value, and the district was particularly focused on ensuring equity of resources across the system. Social and Emotional Learning Systems was added as a priority area, and was considered part of the five formal pillars of School Change (see Figure 1).

Shortly after his appointment in summer of 2013, Superintendent Harries reorganized several roles and responsibilities within the NHPS executive leadership team to align with the pillars of School Change 2.0 and to enhance supports to schools (see Appendix A for NHPS Organizational Chart). The shift in roles was also aimed at reinforcing the core principles of responsibility and empowering decision-making across the organization. As part of the reorganization, Superintendent Harries created the position of executive director of schools, currently filled by a former director of instruction. The executive director of schools and two directors of instruction were each assigned to oversee a portfolio of approximately thirteen to fifteen schools. Each of these directors took primary responsibility for negotiating the relationship between the schools they support and the central office, which includes responsibility for evaluating and coaching principals in their portfolio of schools as well as coordinating and leading annual school quality reviews for a select group of schools. In an early conversation describing the director's role, Harries said, "I see directors and their role as mediators between schools and central office. They are holding schools accountable, but they are also intended to support schools. They should be trying to make the wider support that comes from central office coherent and rational for the circumstances" (personal communication, 2014).

In addition, Superintendent Harries created the position of deputy superintendent, currently filled by the former assistant superintendent of academics. The deputy superintendent leads the academic and data departments. Under the deputy superintendent are curriculum supervisors, one for each content area. Curriculum supervisors are responsible for coordinating the creation of district-wide curricula and pacing guides, writing quarterly assessments organized by content area, and providing professional development, instructional support, and coaching to teachers and school-based instructional coaches. At the beginning of each year, the curriculum supervisors conduct a "risk assessment" designed by an outside consulting firm to determine how

support will be allocated to schools and teachers during the school year. Depending on a school's level of risk as determined by this assessment, the curriculum supervisor would conduct a certain number of school visits over the course of the year to observe and coach teachers. When I entered the organization, the deputy superintendent and executive director of schools did not have regular time set aside to meet with one another and there was not a formal system for sharing the risk assessments with directors of instruction or principals.

Superintendent Harries also created the position of chief financial officer and a fifth department—Talent—to join the other four departments that support the district: Student Services, Wraparound, College and Career Pathways, and Operations. A chief or director, who reports directly to the superintendent, heads each of these departments. Within a week of my arrival at NHPS, the new chief financial officer and the new director of the Talent Department joined the executive leadership team. The director of Talent was a former elementary school principal in the district, and the chief financial officer was most recently the chief financial officer of another large urban school district outside of Connecticut. Of note, Superintendent Harries chose to eliminate what had been his previous position—assistant superintendent of portfolio management and reform—because, as he explained, he was taking that skill set with him to the superintendent's position and redistributing some of his previous duties, such as supervising schools, to other staff positions and roles (Bailey, 2013b).

## THE RESIDENCY AND FRAMING THE STRATEGIC PROJECT

I started as a resident with NHPS in late June 2014. While my role included working closely with the directors of instruction, the nature and scope of my work was broadly defined: to help NHPS strengthen and improve the relationship between the central office and schools and the central office's support of schools. As the superintendent said when presenting my position to

the school board for approval in May 2014, one of the organization's goals was to strengthen communication and feedback loops between the central office and schools to enhance organizational learning and leadership capacity. In a conversation in May 2014, the superintendent identified success in the following way: “Within ten months, the organization will start implementing a series of changes to improve the processes and systems that govern the relationship between the central office and schools” (personal communication).

The relatively undefined nature of my role and responsibilities within NHPS, particularly upon my entry, highlighted transitional tension within an organization trying to integrate a shifting vision and new leadership with existing personnel and certain historical practices.<sup>4</sup> Through the "Listening Tour Report" and public comments, the superintendent signaled ambitious goals and articulated principles to shape the work moving forward, including the idea that “the answer is in the room.” The senior leaders were encouraged to work together, and with other stakeholders, in coordinated ways. Working with his senior leadership team, the superintendent often named particular challenges, posed important questions to consider, and suggested particular frames and mental models for thinking about the work. The ambitious expectation was that members of the organization would work together and grapple with issues, identifying solutions that best support schools and student learning. A major challenge, however, was that departments often operated in silos and this orientation toward collaboration and cross-functional problem-solving was a new organizational expectation. In addition, the direction provided to the departments was often perceived as lacking clarity and specifics. As one senior

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<sup>4</sup> In spring of 2014, prior to the start of my residency, NHPS undertook a two-day district initiative mapping exercise facilitated by an outside organization as part of a grant requirement. The lack of role clarity and “ownership” for initiatives and projects was identified as an issue in the final report. The report noted, “There is the recognition that a lack of defined owners, and lack of clarity concerning the role responsibilities of an owner are most likely contributing to the lack of top performance [at NHPS]” (Center for Secondary School Redesign, 2014).



leader stated early in my residency, “We’re being asked to collaborate, but just putting us in a room together doesn’t mean we know how to solve the problems or work differently with one another. I just need to be told what I’m supposed to do and I’ll do it” (personal communication, 2014).

During my initial interviews, a number of leaders noted that in previous years the district wrote a state-mandated District Improvement Plan (DIP), which outlined performance targets, strategic initiatives, and a set of action steps. The state monitored the plan during quarterly district data team meetings, and there were clear expectations about what the district was responsible for showing the state at each meeting. One set of senior leaders described these meetings as “a dog and pony show” and an exercise in compliance, but other leaders on the senior team said the DIP and accompanying data team meetings provided direction and a clear set of expectations for the district. Without a written district improvement plan, these senior leaders expressed uncertainty about the district goals, targets, and priorities.

Some members of the leadership team and middle management were uncertain about how they should be spending their time and organizing their work. As one member of the leadership team said, “We’re not going to make progress without a plan. I don’t know what our plan is besides these high-level goals. We always had a way to monitor progress and now we don’t. I just don’t get it, so I’m just going to keep doing what I’ve been doing” (personal communication, 2014). Another commented during an early interview, “This superintendent wants change, he wants us doing things differently, but roles and responsibilities for change initiatives constantly feel fuzzy and uncoordinated. People just keep bumping into each other and then getting upset when ‘turf’ is crossed” (personal communication, 2014).

As a result of the uncertainty about the district’s priorities, and the lack of a formal system to monitor priorities and key initiatives strategically, I began my residency by developing

a district structure to promote cross-functional collaboration, problem-solving, and monitoring. This process rearticulated district priorities and key initiatives and helped to define certain roles and responsibilities in priority areas. I then led the strategic planning and execution of those key initiatives under school portfolio supports. This included leading a cross-functional senior leadership team responsible for redesigning the school improvement planning process.

My time as resident thus became focused on addressing the following research question: How can an urban school district use school improvement planning to enhance cross-functional work within the central office, and the partnership between the central office and schools, to improve teaching and learning?

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF KNOWLEDGE FOR ACTION**

Under the leadership of Superintendent Harries, NHPS focused on the principle of collective responsibility and began organizing itself in support of schools. Embedded in this principle was a deep belief that responsibility depends on, and includes, teamwork and support. In service of this principle, a primary component of the School Portfolio Supports pillar was to ensure that each school was supported on its own unique path to success. To accomplish this, one initiative adopted at the start of the 2014-2015 school year was the redesign of school improvement plans. The focus of my strategic project while I was a resident with NHPS was coordinating and providing leadership for this initiative.

This Review of Knowledge for Action (RKA) highlights four bodies of work that frame the strategic project and my leadership during the residency. I draw from literature in several sectors in order to understand how an urban school district might develop and implement a coherent strategy to promote school improvement. The literature covers the following areas of study:

- Strategy and execution
- School improvement planning
- Teaming and organizational learning
- Central office transformation

Research in these areas sheds light on how school districts can successfully engage schools and the central office in processes that foster collaborative cultures to improve teaching and learning.

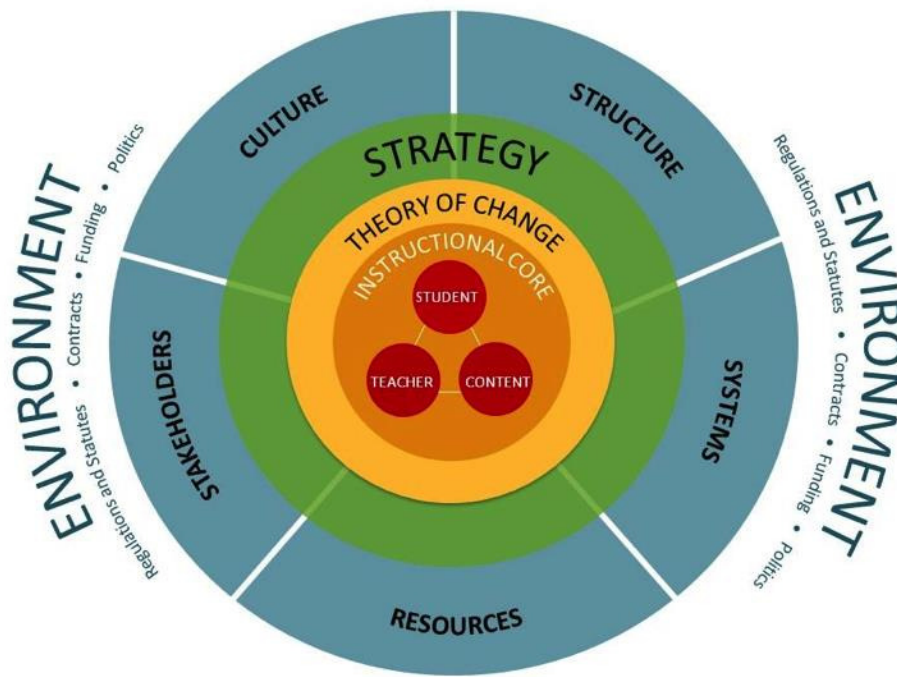
## STRATEGY: PLANNING AND EXECUTION

Surrounding the instructional core is strategy—the set of actions a district deliberately undertakes to strengthen the instructional core with the objective of increasing student learning performance district wide. In order to make teaching and learning more effective, a district’s improvement strategy must articulate how it will strengthen and support the instructional core through integrated activities that increase teachers’ knowledge and skill, change the students’ role in the teaching and learning process, and ensure that curriculum is aligned with benchmarks for performance.

—Childress et al., *Managing School Districts for High Performance*, 2007

The creation of strategic plans by urban school districts has become commonplace within the last two decades. However, effective implementation of these strategic plans, which leads to improved student outcomes and school performance, continues to be a challenge. This is not confined to the field of education. Seventy percent of the new strategies businesses adopt fail (Matarazzo, 2012), and “large scale changes that organizations often pursue in support of strategic change are—regardless of industry—not successful” (Eicher, 2006).

As Stacey Childress describes it, strategy is “The set of actions an organization chooses to pursue in order to achieve its objectives. These deliberate actions are puzzle pieces that fit together to create a clear picture of how people, activities and resources of an organization can work effectively to accomplish a collective purpose” (Curtis & City, 2009, p. 3). In education, especially in urban school districts, strategy operates in a highly politicized environment and a historically loose and fragmented system. The Public Education Leadership Project (PELP), a joint project of Harvard Business School, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and nine urban school districts launched in 2004, was created in part to respond to the managerial and leadership challenge urban school districts face by creating a knowledge base for the strategic management of public education (Childress, Elmore, & Grossman, 2005).



**Figure 2: Public Education Leadership Project Coherence Framework**

As is noted in the PELP framework (Figure 2), for a district strategy to be successful, it must be coherent, promote organizational alignment, connect to teachers' work in classrooms, and be something that enables people at all levels to carry out their part (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & Johnson, 2007). School systems face the unavoidable challenge of creating strategy that provides a relatively clear picture of how the puzzle pieces fit together and is nimble enough to continuously realign as the organization learns better ways to achieve its goals (Matarazzo, 2012).

In the literature on strategy development and implementation, six key components emerge as critical to the success of a new strategy: detailed action planning and accountability, aligning resources to the plan, coherence, engagement, systems for monitoring adjustment, and implementation as a learning process for individuals and the organization.

There is almost universal agreement in the literature about the importance of a theory of action, which drives the strategy. From this theory of action emerges the creation of action plans, which include the strategy, objectives or intended outcomes, roles and responsibilities, timelines, and resources that will be needed to execute the strategy with success (Childress et al., 2005; Curtis & City, 2009; Matarazzo, 2012). In *Strategy in Action*, Curtis and City outline these components as the building blocks of strategy. Strategy begins with a clear definition of the performance problem and continues with an articulation of actions the district believes will produce improved results (Childress et al., 2005). This articulation of an action plan bridges the gap between the problem definition and the intended outcomes. As Curtis and City state, “Effective strategy execution requires the alignment of resources, structures, and systems,” including the “technical, managerial disciplines of project planning, managing work flow, and tracking metrics,” all of which are often not well-established structures or systems within school districts (2009, p. 147, 145).

Literature on strategy suggests that accountability for action plans and their execution are important. Childress et al. (2005) say that part of successful strategy implementation includes accountability structures that incorporate benchmarks, clear roles and responsibilities, and decision rights. Curtis and City extend this to suggest that teams—the “lifeblood of high-performing organizations” — need structures and systems in place by which they hold themselves accountable for processes and outcomes associated with the strategy (2009, p. 145). This notion of team (or collective) and individual responsibility was a core value of NHPS's School Change initiative and the key cultural shift the organization was trying to make as it redefined the relationship between schools and the central office, as well as relationships among teams and individuals within the central office.

Without resources aligned with a strategy, it simply becomes “words on a page with no hope of implementation” (Curtis & City, 2009, p. 145). For strategy to be real, its execution must

be aligned with the budgeting process and how resources of people, time, and money are allocated. This includes the important strategic planning step of making hard choices about what to stop doing. Given that resources are finite, especially the resource of time, school districts must prioritize and make tradeoffs as part of the strategic planning process. Charles Payne (2008) points out that impediments to program and strategy implementation are often the result of a lack of time for training, planning, and reflection. Honig and Hatch (2004) assert that supporting implementation through the allocation of appropriate resources is one of the most important roles for a central office.

Besides aligning the allocation of resources with the strategy, central offices play a primary role in ensuring coherence among strategies, between objectives, and across new actions and current practices. Theorists have different definitions of coherence, but all agree that coherence requires a connection between what is currently in place, what will be or is being implemented, and the intended results. Honig and Hatch (2004) define coherence as a dynamic, ongoing process involving multiple actors internal and external to the system. They argue that coherence requires schools and district central office leaders to work in partnerships, constantly “crafting” or negotiating the fit between system-level strategies and school-wide goals and strategies. Childress et al. (2004) add to this discussion of coherence and strategy, noting that it requires systems, structures, culture, stakeholders, and capacity to “cohere” and align in a “logical integration.” Coherence requires systems to prioritize and assist implementers in managing many competing demands and responsibilities (Fullan, 2007).

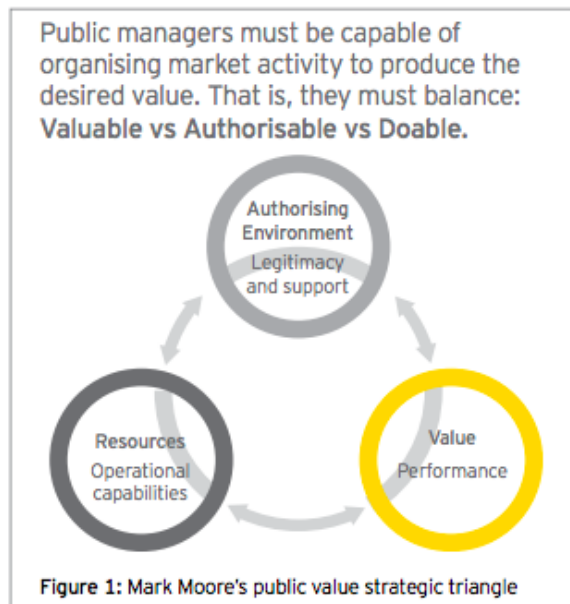
Implementing strategy in an urban district is complex in part because people must recognize the dynamic nature of the plan, as well as the importance of group process and engaging key internal and external stakeholders in the work. Bryson and Alston (2011) assert that for strategy to have the greatest chance of success it needs to be linked to existing practices when possible. They advise working with the implementers to think through how the new strategy

intersects with current reality and explicitly compare the old strategy with the new. Curtis and City echo this argument: “The people charged with executing the strategy need to have a voice in shaping how it will be executed, bringing together the big picture plan of the system with the on-the-ground reality of daily work” (Curtis & City, 2009 p. 170). Honig and Hatch (2004) also highlight the importance of engaging stakeholders in the strategic planning process, suggesting that the more people are involved in creating the strategy, the more likely the strategy will be understood and used.

This research provides an internal perspective on how an urban school district can organize itself to create and execute a coherent strategy successfully. Research on strategic management pioneered by Mark Moore presents an external orientation, however, which is built around the interaction of value, authority, and capacity and the ways in which public leaders may engage communities and organizations in creating, supporting, and legitimizing their work. Figure 3 reproduces his strategic triangle, which focuses on three complex issues that public managers and leaders must consider (Moore, 1997):

1. What is the important public value you are seeking to produce?
2. What sources of legitimacy and support authorize the team, agency, or wider system to take action and provide resources to create that value?
3. What “operational capabilities” (including new investments, innovations, and alliances) does the organization need to rely on (or develop) to deliver the desired results?





**Figure 3: Mark Moore's Public Value Strategic Triangle**

Moore (1997) asserts that “the strategic problem for public managers [is] to imagine and articulate a vision of public value that can command legitimacy and support, and is operationally doable in the domain for which you have responsibility.” The goal of government agencies, school districts among them, is to create public or social value. To create this public value, agencies must set clear objectives and the public, or those who are being served, must be involved in the process of deciding what those objectives should be. Sources of legitimacy include financial and material resources as well as the social and political legitimacy needed to continue operating. And, in an environment where resources such as money, personnel, skills, and technology are limited, the strategic "system" manager must determine how to lobby to increase, reallocate, and better deploy resources to pursue the public value aims (Moore, 1997). Intensely politicized environments, such as the one NHPS operates within, depend on maintaining certain kinds of credibility and legitimacy ( Moore & Khagram, 2004). With School Change 2.0, NHPS asserted its public value (in part) as follows: "To deepen and extend School Change through

significant, collaborative and constructive initiatives, including continuing development of New Haven School Portfolio through both the redesign of schools and enhanced school support" (Revised NHPS School Change 2.0, 2015). The superintendent urged the organization to take collective responsibility for strengthening support to schools. As a result, Moore's strategic triangle became an essential framework I referenced as I considered the public value NHPS was asserting, its authorizing environment, and the organizational capacity necessary for successful execution of the strategic project.

## SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANNING

Even those instances in which one might expect more collective problem-solving—such as in the school improvement planning process—more often than not [they become] symbolic exercises in responding to formulaic requirements of the district office rather than thoughtful and inclusive learning experiences for the staff.

—O'Day, 2002

In 2009, with the launch of School Change, the NHPS strategic plan called for schools to complete school improvement plans (SIPs) as a component of the Portfolio pillar. This is similar to the strategy used by many other districts and states. In the last decade, SIPs have become a common requirement for schools. However, relatively little evidence suggests that merely creating an SIP leads to improved teaching, learning, and student outcomes.

One of the most comprehensive studies on the connection between SIPs and improved teaching and learning is a 2005 dissertation by HGSE doctoral candidate Tom Buffett. He examined the relationship between Whole School Improvement Plans (WSIPs) and teacher and principal instructional practices in Boston Public Schools (Buffett, 2005). He found that the way central office stakeholders, principals, and teachers viewed WSIPs differed from the impact they had. His findings point out that most district-level staff viewed the WSIP as having two primary

functions: (1) a tool to hold teachers and principals accountable and (2) a strategy to build teacher and principal capacity as a result of the conversations school communities have when creating the WSIP. However, principals and teachers he interviewed did not see a relationship between the creation of a WSIP and their own professional growth. Instead, they viewed creation of the WSIP as a “symbolic exercise to fulfill external expectation” (Buffett, 2005, p. 158). Buffett concludes that for strategic school planning to be an effective tool in teaching and learning, stakeholders must have a common understanding of its purpose and there must be an investment in using the process to build a school’s capacity to sustain ongoing improvement.

In a similar study looking at the improvement of schools in Chicago Public Schools, O’Day (2002) notes that SIPs typically become compliance exercises in which schools respond to formulaic requirements rather than creating a thoughtful and inclusive process with the entire school community. This harkens back to the literature on strategy, which highlights the importance of approaching strategic planning and the creation of SIPs as a dynamic process that allows for and encourages adjustments as schools learn through the implementation of their plans.

Looking at the efforts in Montgomery County Public Schools to improve student outcomes, Childress et al. (2009) point out that for strategic planning at the school level to be an effective lever for change and improvement, resources at the district level must be reorganized to provide maximum and differentiated support based on need. Furthering this position, Cohen, Moffitt, and Goldin (2007) assert that policy may be a powerful lever in transforming teaching and learning, but that “policy depends on practice” and, too often, policy is implemented without an infrastructure to support practice. As a result, the relationship between mandating policy, such as the creation of SIPs, and expecting changes in practice as a result presents a dilemma. As they write, “policies aim to solve problems, yet the key problem-solvers are those who have the problem. Governments devise instruments to encourage implementation, but they help only if used well by those with the problem, whose capability is often weak. The realization of policy in

practice thus depends on the fit between capabilities that support implementation and aims” (Cohen, Moffitt, & Goldin, 2007). Many mechanisms, such as SIPs, assume that if schools have the right data about student and educator performance and are required to go through a planning process, they will know what changes to make, accurately identify and measure the impact of a coherent set of strategies, and organize resources in a way that improves student learning.

Kaufman et al. (2012), writing about the role that a district may play in supporting school improvement, note that improvement processes are more important than the writing of SIPs. Their recommendation is that districts or schools need to approach the school improvement enterprise by adopting a specific inquiry cycle and supporting schools in using inquiry to maintain a culture of ongoing reflection and improvement. Honig and her colleagues similarly find that successful district and central office improvement and transformation efforts require the use of data to support continuous improvement and work practices through “cycles of inquiry.” This frequent use of data allows schools and central offices to keep improvement efforts dynamic and focused on continuous growth (Honig et al., 2010). As James Liebman, chief accountability officer for the New York City Department of Education from 2006 to 2009, said about school improvement:

“It’s about capacity building, which to me means adult learning based on self—and team—evaluation of what’s working and what’s not, and knowledge management, meaning spreading what works from one student or school to another....We have to provide ways for schools to build their capacity to be relatively self-sufficient in evaluating themselves everyday and in solving their unique performance problems and, when necessary, in asking for the specific help they need” (O’Day, 2011, p. 92).

In New York City, this was accomplished by developing learning tools and processes that helped schools build their capacity to self-evaluate, solve problems, and create a coherent and strategic direction for improvement.

At its most effective, school improvement planning is dynamic, uses data well, and engages people in improvement processes. When school improvement planning fails to help improve school results, it often is because the plans fail to address the process for improvement and instead focuses only on the outcomes.

## ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND THE ROLE OF TEAM LEARNING

A learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights. This definition begins with a simple truth: new ideas are essential if learning is to take place. Sometimes they are created de novo, through flashes of insight or creativity; at other times they arrive from outside the organization or are communicated by knowledgeable insiders. Whatever their source, these ideas are triggers for organizational improvement. But they cannot by themselves create a learning organization. Without accompanying changes in the way that work gets done, only the potential for improvement exists.

—Garvin, 1993

Many of the recent approaches to district and school reform and improvement include the idea of organizational learning. There is a growing recognition that establishing accountability structures, setting high standards, designing strategic plans, and creating site-specific SIPs must be balanced with efforts to build capacity and increase a team's ability to adjust behavior based on learning (O'Day, 2011). Schechter, Sykes, and Rosenfeld (2004) argue that, in order for an organization to survive, those within the organization must learn to learn. By learning to learn, the organization and the individuals in it can adapt successfully to continuously changing environments and new challenges ( Fernandez, 2011; Huber, 1991; Levitt & March, 1988;). There are a number of different perspectives on organizational learning, all of which point to the challenge highly complex systems face when organizing to learn. Senge (2006) asserts that learning happens through experience and by cultivating an ability to see interrelationships rather than simple and distinct parts. Within complex organizations and systems, the relationships and interdependencies among parts are often hard to recognize, causes are remote from effects, solutions are not directly tied to problems, and feedback is delayed, misrepresented, or misconstrued (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Oshry (1996) builds upon Senge's work, asserting that blindness often lessens an organization's ability to learn effectively. He notes that the causes of system breakdowns are often rooted in troubled relationships between groups that have little

understanding of what is above and below their level. In this hierarchical paradigm, the top and bottom are in a tug-of-war.

While Senge and Oshry see the gap between cause and effect as primary obstacles to organizational learning, Argyris and Schön (1978) highlight the critical role that interpersonal dynamics play in organizations' ability to execute and learn from change. Argyris and Schön demonstrated decades ago that, as problems become more complex and competing demands proliferate, organizations must learn to understand and work together differently. They assert that individual behaviors and responses are driven by personal theories for action, or implicit and explicit assumptions that guide and inform behavior. They distinguish between two types of theories: (1) espoused theories: the accounts individuals provide when trying to explain, describe, or predict behavior; and (2) theories-in-use: the theories that actually guide what people do and are the implicit set of rules people follow when deciding how to behave (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Bolman & Deal, 2013).

In their research, Argyris and Schön found large discrepancies between espoused theories and theories-in-use. They contend that people often do not learn well from their own experiences, which they regard as a type of blindness. Self-protection is the greatest block to learning, according to these theorists. To counteract this, they propose an alternative model to individual and organizational learning, and provide three basic guidelines: (1) emphasize common goals and mutual influence; (2) communicate openly, publically testing assumptions and beliefs; and (3) combine advocacy and inquiry (Argyris & Schon, 1995). While this framework integrates advocacy and inquiry, it rests on creating conditions for high levels of relational trust.

Bryk and Schneider (2003), writing about relational trust, and Schein (2010), writing about psychological safety, agree that creating consistent, shared expectations about the roles and responsibilities of different actors within a system is an important element of building trust. Bryk and Schneider call it a “synchrony of expectations and obligations.” They argue that high levels

of relational trust are particularly important for systems operating in “turbulent external environments” and those undergoing operational change (Bryk, 2002). Relational trust and psychological safety act as the lubricant for organizational change. Without that organizational lubricant, it becomes nearly impossible for the central office and schools to strengthen ties with one another and the community, and to build the professional capacity necessary to enable a student-centered learning environment (Bryk, 2010).

Edmondson (2012) describes psychological safety as the extent to which individuals feel safe enough to take measured risks, offer ideas, ask questions, and raise concerns without fear of excessively censorious responses (either formal or informal). She outlines four key leadership actions to facilitate teaming and implement an organizing-to-learn mind-set in a way that incentivizes collaboration and the accessing of collective knowledge (Edmondson, 2012, p. 76):

- Action 1: Frame the situation for learning.
- Action 2: Make it psychologically safe to return.
- Action 3: Learn to learn from failure.
- Action 4: Span occupational and cultural boundaries.

Edmondson (2008) also argues for “establishing standard processes” as a key step in organizational change in psychologically safe environments. Such standard processes provide sanctioned space for experimentation, learning, innovation, and improvement. They contribute to a clearer definition of what is an allowable risk and what is not. This dovetails with Curtis and City's assertion that clear systems and structures are foundational for strategy implementation and execution. However, psychological safety does not mean disregarding accountability or collective responsibility. As Richard Elmore notes in his research, developing internal accountability is a critical component for improving schools and for learning as an organization. Schools and central offices must be able to transform themselves from “atomized incoherent organizations to ones in which faculty share an explicit set of norms and expectations about what good instructional practice looks like” (Forman, 2005). To do this, organizations must be able to set high performance aspirations while acknowledging areas of uncertainty that require continued

exploration or debate (Edmondson, 2008). Given the confluence of change and accountability, this suggests the importance of paying attention to both psychological safety and the balance between internal and external accountability.

A body of recent research points to the critical role that teams play in organizational learning and improvement. Few school systems that have made significant progress in student growth outcomes have not relied on high-functioning senior leadership teams (Curtis & City, 2009). Creating such a team requires effort and support. Research conducted by Edmonson and Hackman (2007) asserts that teams are an organization's best change agent. A central tenet of strong teaming is that members of the team work with one another and with other sectors of the organization to support dynamic change and create a learning zone. As Edmonson (2012) notes, learning as a member of a team requires iterative cycles of communication, decision, action, and reflection. Through these actions, team members find new ways to use collective knowledge effectively to improve organizational routines. These cycles allow teams to address tensions and be more deliberate about building processes for intentional reflection, thus making it more likely that the team will learn from mistakes and be able to make mid-course adjustments to strategy (Edmondson, Bohmer, & Pisano, 2001).

In their work with numerous school districts and their leadership teams, Curtis and City have observed that team functioning, and particularly senior leadership team functioning, is often a strong predictor of an organization's health. For strategy to be executed and an organization's vision realized, people must work effectively in teams and across silos. In outlining their recommendations for developing district strategy, Curtis and City identify five key building blocks of effective team functioning (Curtis & City, 2009, p. 40):

- Purpose: Is the team's purpose clear, challenging, and consequential?
- People: Are the right people on the team?
- Structures and Systems: Are the necessary structures in place to support high functioning teams?
- Capacity: Does the team have the capacity to function well?
- Accountable: Is the team accountable for its processes and outcomes?



At NHPS, an initial and significant challenge was that effective teaming and teaming cycles such as those described by Edmonson and Hackman did not seem to exist among central office employees or departments, or in the executive leadership team. The building blocks for effective teaming became a key diagnostic tool to address problems as they arose during the strategic project.

## CENTRAL OFFICE TRANSFORMATION

Central offices have traditionally focused on business and compliance functions rather than on supporting schools in their efforts to help all students realize ambitious learning goals. To address this mismatch between new performance demands and long-standing central office work and capacity, district leaders must set aside old ways of working and fundamentally transform their central offices.

—Honig, 2013

For decades, researchers studied the role of urban superintendents and education policy but largely ignored the roles of the hundreds of staff members in urban central offices whose work affects what happens in those offices, how staff members work with one another, and how that work relates to school and student improvement (Honig et al., 2010). Recently, a number of large- and mid-size urban districts have attempted to redefine the roles and responsibilities of central office staffers in an effort to improve teaching and learning in district schools.

The Consortium for Policy Research in Education examined the role of central office staff in a 2001 study of three large urban districts (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001). The study highlighted the ways central office administrators support and shape instructional reform. Corcoran, Fuhrman, and Belcher found that the three districts they studied endeavored to grant schools some autonomy in making decisions about improvement strategies and instructional improvement while encouraging them to adopt institutional best practices. Acknowledging this as a challenging balance for many districts, they identified the need for districts to build capacity

and an evidence-based culture in both the central office and schools if the district is to play an effective role in improving school performance and instruction (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001).

In 2003, Cuban and Usdan explored why reforms aimed at instructional improvement in urban school districts have such “shallow roots.” They concluded that reformers' effort to find just the right formula for school improvement to take to scale is a “fool’s errand.” They conducted case studies of six districts trying to create an instructional infrastructure to support teaching and learning. In each case, the improvements were incremental and any success short-lived. They identified three primary reasons that present a cautionary tale for education leaders and reformers. First, instructional improvement depends heavily on continuity of leadership. Like many urban school districts, the six districts they profiled had superintendents with relatively short tenures. Second, creating an inviting instructional infrastructure for teachers and principals is incredibly challenging organizational work. Third, for systemic top-down reform to actually change the instructional core and classroom teaching, districts have to secure teacher endorsement and parent support. Marshaling this coalition and creating a shared public value can be incredibly difficult and time-consuming (Cuban & Usdan, 2003). Their analysis concludes that if schools are the unit of change that matters, and the goal is persistent and sustainable school improvement, teachers and principals must be partners in the implementation of reform strategies.<sup>5</sup>

In 2004, the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, a network of school reformers operating in nine cities, commissioned a report titled *Leading from the Middle* to

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<sup>5</sup> While this study, and much of the research, creates a bifurcation between the central office and schools, there is also a complex relationship between teachers and principals, who have unique interests that require different strategies to strengthen teaching and learning. The research rarely addresses this, nor does this capstone, but it is an important dynamic that impacts school improvement efforts.

examine the district's role in instructional improvement and school improvement. Burch and Spillane's three-year qualitative study examined the district-school relationship in three urban districts. They noted that mid-level central office employees play a strategic role and occupy a strategic position between innovations unfolding at school sites and within, across, and beyond various central office departments. They called this work "brokering." In essence, mid-level and senior-level central office staff broker knowledge, ideas, and resources within and across the district (Burch & Spillane, 2004). They become critical to improvement efforts on behalf of the district, acting as tool designers, data managers, trainers, support providers, and network builders. The report uncovered two primary approaches to brokering. In most cases, central office administrators took on an authoritative role, casting themselves as experts and those at school sites (e.g., principals and teachers) as beneficiaries of this expertise. This fits with the traditional role of district central offices: monitoring compliance activities and mandates. Burch and Spillane (2004) found a much smaller number of central office administrators who adopted a collaborative orientation, seeing teachers and principals as a substantive source of expertise and utilizing this expertise to inform strategy and policy. For these administrators, brokering meant fostering exchanges to help the central office "learn from and become informed by" the expertise and the reform already happening at schools (Burch & Spillane, 2004). Burch and Spillane conclude that the latter approach supports instructional and school improvement efforts far more effectively. Some emerging literature suggests that principals can also play a similar brokering role in reform efforts and thus, for reform efforts to get traction, the vertical dimension must be considered (Wallace Foundation, 2013).

In 2009, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform created a task force to suggest how urban districts might approach transformation to improve student results, school performance, and equity (Moffit, 2009). The task force noted the critical role that districts play: "Effective central offices do not simply monitor whether schools comply with an endless set of rules;

instead, they work with schools to provide needed resources and support and reach out to community members and organizations to find additional sources of support. They are nimble and flexible, rather than hidebound. And they make decisions using data and research.” They concluded that redesigning the central office is as much about technical modifications to roles, responsibilities, and structures as it is about transforming the culture (Moffit, 2009).

The report presented two potential frameworks for approaching this change management process. Moffit presents the first framework by saying any effective organization must take three primary steps to ensure that its center adds value to the operating unit (schools) and drives overall improved performance (Moffit, 2009). First, similar to what Cuban and Usdan urge, any district strategy aimed at improvement should include the continuous involvement of a cross-section of stakeholders (teachers, principals, parents, and others outside the central office) in creating the strategy and monitoring its implementation. This resonates with the earlier discussion of lessons learned from district and school strategic planning and improvement efforts, as well as organizational learning literature. Strategic planning processes exert the greatest leverage when they are rooted in a dynamic partnership between the central office and schools that enables each party to clarify and deliver on their important roles (Kaufman et al., 2012). Second, as mentioned in the prior section of the RKA on strategy, Moffit argues that districts must categorize their key activities according to the value they create and the center’s role in helping to execute these activities. In essence, organizations must determine what is core to their work and stop doing that which is ancillary. Michael Porter (1996) of Harvard Business School notes that often the most important aspect of strategy is determining what to stop doing. Third, Moffit asserts that, after completing the first two steps, districts must design a formal organizational structure and key supporting mechanisms while continuing to push decision-making to the operating units “unless there is compelling reason, such as significant strategic consequences or economics of scale, to centralize.” This framework presents district and central office reform and transformation as a

rather technical, rational, and linear process, but it also echoes many of the key tenets outlined by Curtis and City in their recommendations for implementing and executing strategy.

In the same report, Foley and Sigler establish the second framework, noting that part of the problem for school district central offices is a lack of clarity about their essential roles. They propose that districts and central offices must collaborate and partner in critical ways with a variety of organizations (e.g., educational management organizations, child and family service organizations, service providers); they must also be service-oriented and develop a coherent and aligned strategy. However, while this framework helps address questions about what central offices and districts should aspire to do, it provides little guidance on how to do this work. Some of the earlier research provides recommendations to achieve Foley and Sigler’s third function (i.e., how to develop coherent and aligned strategy in an effective manner).

There are some glaring limitations to these two frameworks. Using the four-frame model for examining organizations that Bolman and Deal introduced in their seminal book, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership* (2013), the frameworks presented in the Annenberg report focus heavily on the structural frame: organizing and structuring groups and teams, with an emphasis on clarifying roles, responsibilities, goals, and policies to drive improved results. What the structural frame does not take into account is the particularly challenging context of urban school districts, in which central offices are often plagued by frequent turnover in senior leadership, reorganization, fragmentation, political protection, multiple and often conflicting accountability structures, and a predilection for compliance-driven reforms rather than an orientation toward supporting continuous improvement and organizational learning (Payne, 2008). As Payne (2008) asserts, the urban school system often evolves into a “pathology of bureaucracy, an organization whose traditions, structure, and operations subvert the organizational mission”—a mission that should be focused on student learning, organizational learning, and the continuous improvement of schools.

Honig's five years of research examine district central office transformation in more specific ways. In conducting a number of qualitative and quantitative studies of large urban districts, she noted that central office administrators support the implementation of initiatives by either bridging schools or buffering schools from the rest of the central office (Honig, 2009). Leaders running transformative systems look carefully at each function and its impact on the instructional core through performance management systems, and they are open to eliminating or changing functions and departments (Honig, 2013). Honig's research notes that redesigning the central office rests on leaders in those systems who continuously help staff acquire the capacity "for the right work" and continuously learn from the work they are doing in order to improve. Central office leadership in the districts she studied worked to build the capacity of staff members to manage projects and move beyond their traditional roles and silos, solving problems through cross-functional teams.

## TENSIONS IN THE RESEARCH

Several types of tensions are evident in the literature. An inherent tension is creating psychological safety and the space for innovation and "failing forward." This is challenging in an urban school district such as NHPS, where the tasks and asserted public value (i.e., to ensure success for all students and to build a system of great schools) are urgent and directly impact young people. Leaders must find ways to recognize this urgency to change historical practices that lead to ineffectiveness, inefficiency, and low performance while creating a climate that cultivates trust and allows people to feel comfortable taking risks.

All research I surveyed agrees that some conditions are critical for strong teaming, organizational learning, and school improvement. As Bryk and others have noted, however, it is much harder to create these conditions (particularly trust, which represents the "social energy" necessary for transforming school change) in urban school districts (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

Urban school districts exist within larger institutional environments that are often turbulent, unstable, undermining, and unsupportive (Payne, 2008). Change naturally creates ambiguity, confusion, and distrust. As work and priorities shift, people become uncertain about what is expected of them, how they should relate to others, and who has the authority to make decisions (Bolman & Deal, 2013). This uncertainty was acute at NHPS, as a new mayor and superintendent succeeded predecessors who had each held the job for more than twenty years, and as new structures, systems, and expectations were established in the central office. As previously mentioned, organizational learning happens best when there is time to test, evaluate, and iterate ideas and strategy. Strategy is most at risk when there is a lack of time for training, planning, and reflection, and for the allocation of appropriate resources. Finding this time is especially challenging in urban school districts, with central offices that often operate in unpredictable political and budgetary environments with fragmented sources of authority, accountability, and funding. The school improvement planning process suffers especially from this temporal deficit because the district lacks the wherewithal to fully develop and align policies and resources with a dynamic school improvement process, which would foster a collaborative, trusting, and supportive working relationship between the district and each school.

A second tension is creating the right coalition to lead a strategic improvement and transformation process. As Curtis and City point out, leadership requires recognizing the complexity of the work and being able to simplify it. Reinventing and transforming an urban school district requires leaders and leadership that can create coherence from organizational incoherence, demonstrate the flexibility to reframe experiences so as to promote new perspectives and new issues, and possess the capacity to navigate, if not embrace, complex and ambiguous environments. Central office transformation literature focuses primarily on process. It says little about how to cope with power and conflict, build coalitions, and deal with the external and internal politics of urban school districts. The strategic planning and teaming literature advocates

having the right people but says less about how to operate within political constraints to make changes to resources, personnel, and operational capacity. If transformation is to be sustained, it often requires changing whole systems and the context within which people work (Fullan, 2011). This can be especially complex given the authorizing environment and operational capacity of urban school districts.

## THEORY OF ACTION AND HYPOTHESIS

The bodies of literature reviewed in the RKA outline (1) the conditions and types of leadership support necessary at the central office and school levels to support the execution of strategy and school improvement planning, (2) the mechanisms and people best positioned to support such work, and (3) how to evaluate those strategy and transformation efforts for impact and effectiveness.

Against this backdrop, and given the limited time and additional assignments I had in my role as resident, my focus for the strategic project was to lead the design of district supports for school improvement, in particular the redesign of NHPS's school improvement planning process. This included creating tools and structures to drive improved cross-functional work within the central office as well as strengthen the partnership between the central office and schools as school leadership teams created site-specific improvement plans. My goal was to help create the conditions necessary to build organizational capacity in the central office to support schools in developing meaningful improvement plans and aligning resources with an individual school's particular theory of action and strategy for improvement.

Much of the work of the strategic project focused on creating conditions to shift NHPS from an organization designed to execute and monitor compliance activities to an organization able to support strategic planning, collaboration, and organizational learning, and ultimately to improve teaching and learning across the district (Edmondson, 2012). Within the context of



redesigning the school improvement planning process, my leadership focused primarily on creating conditions to shift the ways in which members of a cross-functional senior leadership team worked with one another and with school leadership teams to strengthen continuous cycles of improvement.

Organizational systems rely on different mechanisms to alter the behavior of individuals and groups of individuals. Formal rules are one mechanism, and normative structures are another (O'Day, 2002). Large bureaucracies in particular tend to rely heavily on rules and regulations as a means of controlling for quality and outcomes. With a focus on redesigning the school improvement planning process to emphasize strategic planning elements, while relying less on rules and regulations and more on building systems to support continuous learning, I entered into my strategic project with the following theory of action.

If I

- 1) Lead a cross-functional central office team through the collaborative process of developing joint project and learning goals related to the design of a school improvement planning process;
- 2) Embed frequent feedback loops related to the school improvement planning process between this cross-functional central office team and school leaders, while modeling the use of feedback to inform a collaborative school improvement design process; and
- 3) Lead the development of tools, resources, and workshops to engage central office staff and school leaders in collaborative cycles of data analysis, goal setting, and school-level action planning and refinement,

Then members of the cross-functional team will

- 1) Increase their ability to work with one another to address issues, solve problems, and make collective decisions;
- 2) Be able to recognize and name interdependencies more clearly and craft a compelling team-level purpose for developing a school improvement planning process;

- 3) Have an increased sense of collective responsibility and capacity to support schools in the creation of individualized school improvement plans that are unique to a school's own individual path to success; and
- 4) Have increased comfort in assessing, adjusting, and learning from feedback.

In addition, principals, teachers, and schools will

- 1) Have a common purpose and understanding of school improvement planning and processes aligned with, and informed by, the central office;
- 2) Have greater clarity about central action, will experience more aligned and differentiated supports from the district, and will approach the planning process as learning and inquiry in collaboration with central actors;
- 3) Develop effective teaming, feedback, and support structures to drive continuous school improvement and improvement in teaching and learning;
- 4) Increase their level of trust in the central office; and
- 5) Experience an increased sense of collective responsibility by central actors for supporting schools in the development and implementation of their school improvement plans.

## **CHAPTER 3: DESCRIPTION, RESULTS, AND ANALYSIS OF THE STRATEGIC PROJECT**

### **CONTEXT AND FRAMING THE DESCRIPTION OF THE STRATEGIC PROJECT**

When I began the residency in late June 2014, the district was in the process of revisiting its priority areas and the strategic initiatives that would drive improvement toward the district's goals. The superintendent identified the need to establish strategic monitoring cycles, tasking his executive manager of strategy and coordination, a consultant, and me to propose such a framework. Thus, the first phase of my work, which took place in early August 2014, was to develop a framework that articulated the strategic priorities and strategic initiatives for the 2014-2015 school year within each pillar of School Change 2.0. From there, I led the creation of a structure to strengthen coordination, communication, and collaboration across streams of work (see Appendix B for the Performance & Learning Review framework and outline of key priority areas and initiatives). The result was the design and launch of the Performance & Learning Review (P&L Review) meetings. Each week, a two-hour P&L Review meeting was held, with a “deep dive” into a key initiative in one of the five priority areas (see Appendix C for a calendar of P&L Review meetings). A coordinator from the executive leadership team and a project manager were selected for each priority area. Each coordinator was responsible for ensuring appropriate cross-functional participation at their designated P&L Review meeting and with the working group assigned to each key initiative within the pillar. Project managers helped coordinate this cross-functional support of initiatives by creating agendas and materials, synthesizing key takeaways from the meetings, and tracking the progress of each initiative. By early September 2014, NHPS launched the first P&L Review meeting focused on the Academic Learning Systems pillar.

A by-product of the process of creating the P&L Review framework was a clearer articulation of the district's strategic initiatives and an updated set of key initiatives for the Portfolio of Schools Support pillar. The goal of this pillar was to support each school on its own unique path to success. In 2009, as part of the launch of School Change, NHPS had outlined five core components of this pillar; implementation of the components began in the 2010-2011 school year. The five original core components were:

- **School Learning Environment (SLE) Survey** – Administer an annual survey of students, parents, teachers, and school staff to assess the health of the school's climate.
- **School Tiering** – Organize schools in three tiers based on the school's average SLE responses, student growth, and percentage scoring on the CMT; for high schools, tiering categorization was also based on the college enrollment rates two years after graduation and the school's five-year cohort graduation rate.
- **School Improvement Planning** – Create individual school plans that outline academic goals for the year and develop systems to monitor and meet those goals. The levels of autonomy and decision-making granted to schools, in theory, align with their tiering status.
- **Turnaround Schools** – Develop transformation plans and interventions for schools that continue to struggle and are categorized as “Tier II – improvement” or “Tier III – turnaround.” Transformation plans often included a change of work rules and, at times, the displacement of faculty.
- **The Central Office Survey** – Administer an annual survey of principals and assistant principals to assess the quality of management, support, and tools that school-based administrators receive from central office management.

Five years after the start of School Change, however, Superintendent Harries concluded that NHPS had to revisit the ways in which schools were being supported to progress along their paths

to success. In 2013, the superintendent stated, “[We must] continue school improvement and school turnaround programs, while strengthening and tailoring the supports offered to schools; strengthening transparency and equity in the management of the system, including with enrollment processes and school budgeting” (City of New Haven, 2013).

In response, NHPS identified four additional key initiatives within the Portfolio of Schools Support pillar:

1. Design a framework for shared accountability and support, including reexamining the district’s Key Performance Indicators,<sup>6</sup> tiering, and peer indexing;
2. Reexamine and redesign the School Improvement Planning process, including strengthening support systems and processes;
3. Evaluate and align feedback systems, including school quality reviews, instructional rounds, and supervisor visits<sup>7</sup>; and
4. Lead the campus design efforts at Hillhouse Campus and Wilbur Cross high schools.

The executive director of schools and I were designated coordinators for these initiatives.

The directors of instruction were critical to the design and implementation of these initiatives.

This was a new set of responsibilities for the executive director and directors of instruction, whose primary responsibilities prior to this year were coaching and evaluating principals and

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<sup>6</sup> Over the course of SY 2013-2014, NHPS identified a set of Key Performance Indicators to measure district and school performance on a broad range of academic and human resource functions. The district monitors these indicators annually to measure student achievement and growth.

<sup>7</sup> NHPS began to implement School Quality Reviews (“SQRs”), subsequently called Director Reviews, beginning in 2009. The goal of SQRs was to provide a critical tool for schools and the district that included three stages: a self-evaluation, a site visit led by a director of instruction, and feedback, including a written report following the visit. While there was a protocol in place to follow when conducting SQRs, the quality of the NHPS SQR process and report produced was highly variable.

acting as intermediaries between the central office and schools. Their prior roles had not involved coordinating and leading district-wide strategic initiatives.

Though I ultimately played an important coordination and leadership role for all four initiatives within the Portfolio of Schools Support pillar, the primary focus of analysis for my capstone is my leadership of a cross-functional senior leadership team to redesign NHPS's school improvement planning process, and this is the work I reference as the strategic project.

In October 2014, Superintendent Harries charged the "portfolio school support team"<sup>8</sup> with examining and designing a revised framework for school accountability and support. In particular, the superintendent sought an organizing framework and benchmarks that would allow the district and the school board to better understand the story of a school and the context in which it operates. In 2013, during his first year in office, the superintendent chose not to tier schools. In public comment, he noted the need to reexamine the tiering process and incorporate lessons learned from the first four years of School Change when considering modifications to the NHPS performance-based accountability system. Historically, the process of tiering schools occurred later in the year (often in November or January, using data from the prior school year), so that schools received feedback on their past academic performance but not in time to make adjustments before the new school year. Tiering was designed to provide a fair and transparent measure to help NHPS stakeholders – teachers, parents, administrators, students, and the community – understand school performance and allocate resources and support to improve the schools deemed lower performing (NHPS, 2013). One goal of tiering was to present a more fine-grained understanding of schools, their performance, and areas of need in order to provide

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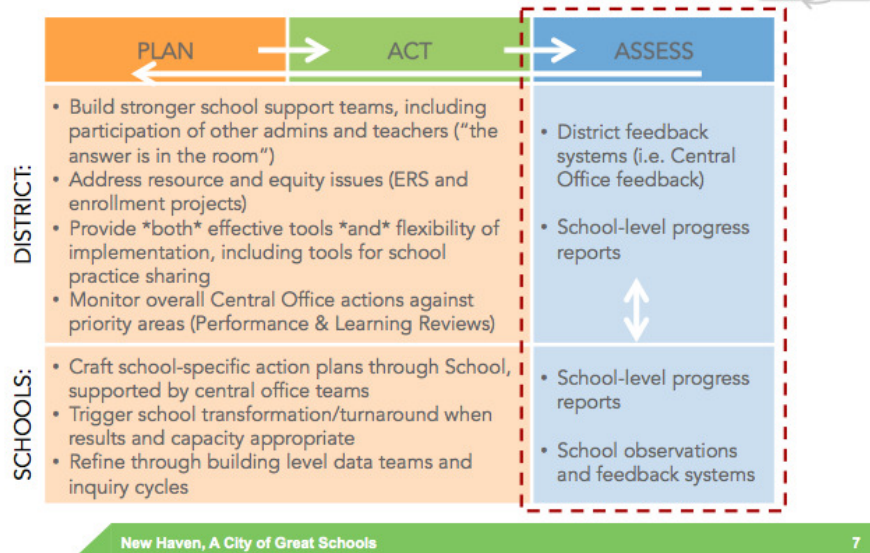
<sup>8</sup> The word "portfolio" appears in several titles, with basically the same meaning, at NHPS. School Change 2.0 has a Portfolio of Schools Support pillar and a Portfolio of Schools vision and priority area (see Figure 1). The P&L Review framework has a School Portfolio Supports priority area (see Appendix B). This capstone uses the term School Portfolio Supports hereinafter unless otherwise noted.

differentiated approaches to support improvement, but as a tool it had limitations. One label did not adequately reflect the subtlety of performance or capture student growth at individual schools. In the face of tiering designations, schools, families, and students often felt discouraged and blamed, and the system of tiering tended to deflect the reality that responsibility for school performance runs in all directions, including school support, and should be more explicitly reciprocal among schools and central office.

In response to the 2013 decision not to tier schools, in fall 2014 the school board pressed to see school-level data, to know more about how schools were doing, and to clarify the district's strategy for supporting schools based on their unique needs. In addition, the superintendent placed emphasis on designing a framework that led with shared or collective responsibility rather than leading with accountability.

Thus, in October 2014, I led and coordinated a cross-functional senior leadership team, including the NHPS executive director of instruction, deputy superintendent, and members of the Data Department, to produce a balanced progress report for schools and a shared responsibility framework. The result was a framework that emphasized action, urgency, school support, equity, and engagement (Figure 4).

## Shared Responsibility and Support Framework



**Figure 4: Shared Responsibility and Support Framework**

One component of the shared responsibility and support framework was the introduction of a balanced progress report to replace tiering. The balanced progress report was organized around six key domains – student academic progress, student engagement, organizational engagement, school-level equity, and up to two school-specific metrics (schools could identify up to two unique additional measures to include on their balanced progress report) – with key performance indicators identified within each domain (see Appendix D for a copy of the balanced progress report). In order to collect feedback from a broad group of stakeholders, I presented an initial prototype of the balanced progress report and shared responsibility framework at a School Portfolio Supports P&L Review in early November 2014. After collecting considerable feedback at this meeting, I presented the revised framework and balanced progress report to the school board a week later. It represented a shift from tiering and categorizing schools and attempted to move toward a framework emphasizing collective action to advance learning, growth, and school agency.



## DESCRIPTION OF THE STRATEGIC PROJECT

After the design of the balanced progress report, the most substantial phase of the strategic project was the redesign of the NHPS school improvement planning process. NHPS had all schools complete SIPs beginning in 2009 as part of School Change. Though the improvement plan was only one element of an overall strategy to increase student achievement and meet the goals set forth in School Change, the district considered a plan of action as a fundamental starting point to guide improvement, particularly for schools going through transformation processes. Now, as part of School Change 2.0, NHPS sought to build stronger district systems to support individual school plans and planning through a revised SIP and collective responsibility framework. As our work shifted to focus on refreshing and modifying the school improvement planning process, I used the building blocks Curtis and City identify as necessary for highly effective teams, as well as Edmondson's organizing-to-learn framework, to guide my leadership and decision-making.

The first step was to frame the situation for learning by creating purpose and clarity about the project. It was important to clearly define the goals of the project and the ways in which this initiative fit within the broader School Change strategic plan. As my research revealed, there was little empirical research on the impact of school improvement planning on student outcomes, and some studies even suggested that formal planning actually leads to inflexible and myopic practices (Fernandez, 2011). As a result, a key objective of the project was to shift away from school improvement planning as a compliance-driven exercise and design a focused planning process for schools that was a lever for school-wide and system-wide improvement and coherence. I initially approached the design of the school improvement planning process guided in part by the IDEO framework, which places users at the center of product design. The goal was to lead the team through the following collective process:

1. Determining the problem we are trying to solve.

2. Identifying our process as a team – how will we design the SIP and get feedback?
3. Building and testing potential prototypes (e.g., SIP templates and tools).
4. Finalizing and sharing with users.

Besides ensuring that the new SIP was user-centered in its creation, the team had to consider adoption and dissemination: how to support schools and the central office in implementing this new process and shifting mind-sets about the role and purpose of school improvement planning.

The second step was determining the right people to engage in the work and making it psychologically safe to do so. As Curtis and City point out, school systems making progress in outcomes for students share a common feature: high-functioning senior leadership teams that provide opportunities for team members to engage, collaborate, and solve problems (Curtis & City, 2009). They assert the importance of getting the right people on the team and having a mix of people who are systems thinkers and team players. For this strategic project, engaging a cross-functional team of senior leadership members was going to be critical to building a guiding coalition that could drive this initiative. The senior leadership team had mixed views about the role SIPs actually play in improving school and student achievement. One member said he had not yet seen a SIP process in any of the districts where he had worked that felt like “a meaningful engine for change” (personal communication, 2014). However, a number of other leadership members said that the previous SIPs allowed central office to hold schools accountable and, without a formal district SIP process during the last year, some schools were “doing whatever they want.” It was important to create a process that engaged a cross-functional team and built their ownership of and commitment to the project. This was a way to build organizational capacity and to change the way the central office leadership and staff engage with one another and with schools. My goal was to use the redesign of the school improvement planning process as an opportunity to redefine how the central office and schools work together to support school improvement, thereby creating a more collaborative partnership.

A third step, which did not emerge until later in the project, was spanning boundaries and determining ways in which the redesign and launch of the school improvement planning process could be used as a lever to integrate and create greater coherence between initiatives in the district. Research on effective improvement points to the concerted district-wide effort needed to align the district's systems in service of student achievement. The cyclical process of measuring progress and focusing on continuous improvement must be supported by systems and processes that enable districts to make informed decisions about next steps based on relevant data and information (Kaufman et al., 2012). As the project progressed, the team began to see how they could integrate the school improvement planning initiative with other district-wide initiatives to maximize the impact of strategic planning, as well as strengthen alignment between initiatives, in support of student and school improvement.

In light of these actions, there were critical turning points in the strategic project that informed my leadership and the project outcomes.

#### *TURNING POINT 1: CREATING THE TEAM AND SETTING THE PURPOSE*

In spring 2014, school based administrators in the district took a central office survey, providing feedback to central office departments about the quality and effectiveness of their supports and services. In the survey, 40% of respondents noted that they sought more support for using data to improve instruction in classrooms, while 37% sought more support and guidance for school improvement planning.

When I entered NHPS, there were no formal structures in place to coordinate and align the departmental work of the Talent, School Portfolio Supports, College and Career Pathways, and Academic departments. The P&L Review structure mapped the initiatives by priority area rather than by department. The executive team had a standing two-hour weekly meeting, which typically consisted of the superintendent or another executive team member raising one or two

topics followed by a roundtable sharing of updates, but there were few other formal meeting structures to align work among departments. Particularly on the academic/school support side, most coordination appeared to happen through informal conversations or one-on-one meetings between individual department members. Additionally, prior to the start of my residency, the superintendent had spoken of the need for more connective tissue between the directors and the deputy superintendent of academics. This reinforced the need to create new structures and systems to support and facilitate cross-functional work.

At a daylong leadership retreat in late October 2014, a key system leader commented that roles and responsibilities seemed to be shifting within the central office under the new P&L Review structure without people clearly being told what was “being taken away” from them. This leader noted that, in prior years, the directors did not lead the school improvement planning process, and expressed confusion and frustration about roles and responsibilities. For me, the conversation flagged the importance of constructing a cross-functional team that included intermediaries between schools and the central office as well as those whose support would be critical for the success and sustainability of the initiative. I wanted to include members from the executive team who had led or been involved in the improvement planning process before and whose work was integral to the mission and functioning of the system and initiative (Curtis & City, 2009). For the school improvement planning initiative to succeed, we needed a cross-functional team to design, understand, and feel ownership of the process. It was important to involve those who sat at the intersection between schools and central office policy and would influence how schools experienced and implemented the initiative. This was also an opportune occasion to engage those working most closely with schools on supporting instructional improvement in a task that created greater connection and mutual understanding of one another’s work.

In late October 2014, after a few months of inconsistent meetings, and right before the SIP design process was to start, I proposed that we start a weekly standing meeting that included the directors of instruction, deputy superintendent of instruction, director of College and Career Pathways, director of Talent, and me. Some members of the team expressed discontent with the number of meetings this year compared to last year. Knowing that clarity and purpose are building blocks for highly effective teams, I explained the purpose of these meetings: to strategically align key initiatives happening across the priority areas of academic learning systems, talent, and school portfolio supports. I stressed the importance of having a group that worked most closely with schools to design the school improvement planning process. After this explanation, members were more receptive to meeting and understood its value. We agreed to a rotating schedule. One week was dedicated to academics, with the deputy superintendent of academics responsible for the agenda and facilitation of the meeting. The following weeks were dedicated to portfolio and talent, with me coordinating the agendas and facilitating the meetings.

When we initially received the charge from the superintendent, I wrestled with how to organize the project and involve members of the central office beyond the directors of instruction. While we were working to create a more formal meeting structure and team for this initiative, the directors of instruction and I began to engage in a series of conversations with building leaders to gather qualitative data and feedback about their prior experiences with the district's school improvement planning process. In addition to one-on-one meetings held at school sites with principals, we facilitated two meetings, one in October and one in early November 2014, with principals, assistant principals, and curriculum supervisors to gather feedback and hear more about their previous experiences with district planning initiatives. Through these conversations, common themes emerged:

- The previous school improvement planning process provided a structure that helped schools to identify goals and look at data.
- SIPs were often long and, for some, felt like static documents.

- SIPs should ultimately be about improving teaching and learning, but too often, their primary function seemed to be accountability.
- The SIP process was most helpful when it was dynamic (not compliance driven) and seen as iterative.
- Support from the central office was helpful when it aligned with a school's needs and priorities. It was not helpful when the central office supported schools by monitoring how well they completed a series of mandates. Support from the central office was limited.
- The SIP should support an ongoing process of improvement, not just focus on the outcomes of improvement.

After collecting this initial feedback from principals and establishing our regular team meeting structure, my objective was to establish joint project goals. Edmondson notes that teams can be an organization's best change agents. However, her research also points out that how teams choose to work together, and their ability to acquire new knowledge and put that knowledge to good use, are critical. Kaufman and colleagues' research on continuous school improvement also highlights the frequent lack of alignment between existing SIPs that districts require and inquiry-driven school improvement efforts (Kaufman et al., 2012). Given the patterns this SIP design team had demonstrated in other settings, the feedback we heard from stakeholders, and the history of school improvement planning at NHPS, I attempted to focus the group on establishing a set of shared goals for the work and a shared understanding of how the work fit within a broader district strategy. At our first meeting, a number of members of the team wanted to focus on finalizing the template and deciding when schools would need to turn in their plans. I sought to shift our focus to a broader purpose. For our second meeting, I took more time to draft an agenda that outlined the broader charge of the School Portfolio Supports priority area. At this meeting, I initially spent time with the team facilitating discussion about the task at hand and the role, purpose, and function of a SIP given this charge (see Appendix E for the description of the SIP initiative as outlined by the superintendent and the cross-functional team). I then proposed how we might approach this charge, suggesting that, rather than starting with a focus on what the template will look like and when it will be due, we start by reaching agreement about the principles of highly

effective school improvement planning. The team agreed to this and allowed me to draft the agendas for our future meetings on school improvement planning.

With the team now meeting biweekly, we focused first on reaching agreement about what a process for strategic planning and continuous improvement should include. It became clear within the first few meetings that members of the team had different opinions about the definition of school support, different ideas about the strengths and weaknesses of the prior NHPS school improvement planning process, and different understandings of our task. For instance, three weeks into the project one member of the team said, “If we just tell schools what they need to focus on, establish a target the school needs to hit, and monitor it closely, schools will improve.” Another member commented a month into meeting, “I don’t understand why we’re changing anything. We are going to overwhelm principals. I don’t understand this. We need to respect what we’ve done before.” Some members of the team continued to focus most acutely on the group’s task of creating a template for schools to complete. Others recognized that the task was to design a process that had broader implications for how the central office supported schools and how schools aligned their resources of time, people, and money with site-based needs. As one member told me in late November 2014 outside of the team meeting, “This project, and how we’re talking about school improvement, has the potential to make a real shift in how we think about supporting schools and holding them and us at central office accountable. However, that message needs to be understood more broadly. It won’t work if only a few of us believe it.” This comment revealed the influence of an organization’s history on its current practices and the complications of deep change, including changing roles within the central office.

All members of the team, at one point or another during the first few months of meetings, referred to the SIP work and planning as “Kelly’s initiative.” Thus, another early goal became to shift the cultural orientation of the work from personal responsibilities or domains (e.g., “Kelly’s initiative”) to something the entire group felt collective responsibility to design,

support, and implement. In order to move away from strategic planning as a compliance exercise, members of the central office, as well as school building leaders, needed to recognize the ways in which strategic planning and monitoring support school and student improvement. Around this time, the deputy superintendent of academics and I had a conversation in which we agreed that a consultant from Cambridge Education, working with the curriculum supervisors, could add valuable support to our team as we revised the school improvement plans. I began to work with the consultant to design the meeting agendas and prepare materials for our meetings.

While it may have been more efficient to outline the SIP process and design accompanying district systems without a committee and broad stakeholder engagement, successful implementation depended on team members and district stakeholders understanding the improvement cycle and the steps involved in strategic planning.

#### *TURNING POINT 2: THE DECEMBER RETREAT*

The team decided to hold a retreat at our deputy superintendent's home over winter break. Its focus was to develop a theory of action for the school improvement planning process, reach consensus about what should be included in the SIP template, and determine next steps for moving the work forward. We set an internal deadline of January 2015 to share a draft with a cross-section of stakeholders at the P&L Review for School Portfolio Supports and planned an official rollout of the SIP process to principals at the monthly superintendent's meeting in early February 2015. These two deadlines created a sense of urgency that kept the work moving forward as a priority despite competing commitments for time.

With the support of the consultant, I drafted an agenda for the December 2014 retreat. Team members agreed to "pre-work," which was to find two strong examples of SIPs previously used at NHPS. At our last meeting before winter break, and prior to the team's retreat, some members expressed the desire not to change anything about the SIP process except the template



formatting. Some members were still focused on the technical and compliance elements, as represented by these remarks: “What’s the template going to look like and when will it be due? Those are the two big decisions we need to make and I don’t understand why we haven’t done that yet.”

A disconnect emerged between how school leaders described their prior experience with SIPs and how some central office leaders thought schools experienced SIPs. I realized that, though we had gathered feedback from school leaders about their experience with SIPs, I needed to build in a more intentional process for our central office team to think through the strengths and weaknesses of the prior SIP process. The team agreed to do a deep analysis of the prior plans as an entry point to talking about how we might improve them. In addition, I wanted to take the team through the process of creating a theory of action as a way to surface team assumptions and make more explicit why we were redesigning the school improvement planning process. City and Curtis advise, “When the leadership team develops the theory of action, it must test its reasoning, surface its assumptions, and make its intentions clear. Doing these things may challenge fundamental beliefs about how the organization will improve or highlight assumptions that need to be challenged” (Curtis & City, 2009, p. 115).

At the December retreat, the consultant facilitated the team's articulation of the following theory of action for the district’s school improvement planning process:

IF we [as a district] develop and implement a coherent/strategic school improvement planning process, then through this process schools will identify strengths and challenges and prioritize data for measuring their improvement effectively; and IF schools prioritize data, then this data will inform specific and measurable goals and strategic objectives resulting in a plan of continuous improvement; and IF school communities regularly monitor progress and adjust accordingly, then there will be increased fidelity to the plan and tracking against the plan leading to student learning outcomes that are improved across schools.

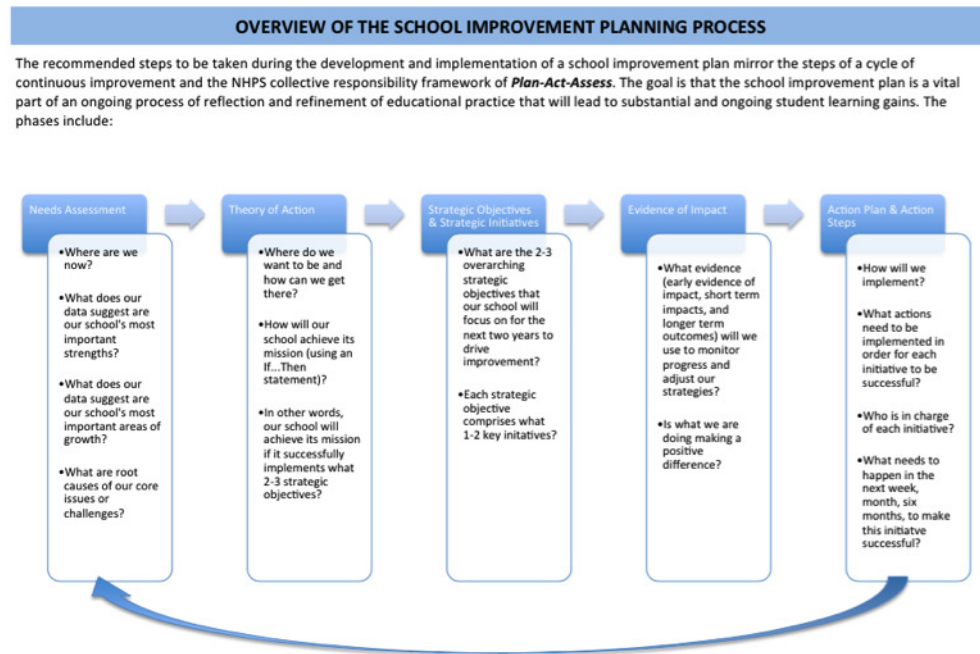
Following the creation of this theory of action, the team turned its attention to agreeing on guiding principles and establishing in greater detail the coherent steps for a school improvement planning process and inquiry cycle. Building on the district’s shared responsibility

framework, which included the iterative inquiry cycle of "PLAN – ACT – ASSESS," we outlined a set of guiding principles and steps for strategic planning (Figure 5).

Guiding Principles of the Planning Process	
<b>Deep and Intentional</b>	Focus on a <b>few</b> overarching objectives. Target identified needs and the instructional core.
<b>Coherent</b>	Develop a <b>coherent and focused</b> set of strategies and initiatives specific to supporting the school's own unique path to success.
<b>Collective Responsibility</b>	Enable and support <b>cross-functional collaboration</b> and take <b>collective responsibility</b> .
<b>Dynamic</b>	Use evidence at interim checkpoints to assess progress. Adjust in a <b>dynamic process</b> in light of new learning, experience, and interim results.
<b>Monitor and Manage</b>	<b>Manage</b> the plan: Identify and support implementation and monitoring of progress.

**Figure 5: Core Principles of NHPS School Improvement Planning**

Following the December retreat, the team gave me the green light to take our theory of action, principles for planning, and outline of planning steps and create a framework and revised SIP template (Figure 6). We continued to meet biweekly, with the team providing feedback on the design of the framework and template.



**Figure 6: NHPS School Improvement Planning Steps and Process**

A few concerns voiced by some team members lingered, but we were able to reconcile most of the differing points of view by continuing to go back to our core principles, particularly the importance of being deep and intentional in targeting areas of need, and the broader project goals we had established.

### *TURNING POINT 3: COLLECTING FEEDBACK AND ROLLING OUT THE PLAN*

By mid-January 2015, the team finalized a SIP template and outlined the components of a strategic planning process and cycle of inquiry. For the P&L Review meeting focused on School Portfolio Supports on January 22, 2015, we invited 50 individuals, representing a cross-section of stakeholders, to attend and provide feedback. (Appendix F contains the agenda from the P&L Review meeting and Appendix G is an excerpt from the SIP template.) Our four objectives at the meeting were to discuss:

1. A draft of the school improvement planning process and tools

2. Feedback we received and used to design the improvement process
3. Possible challenges to school improvement planning and the supports that schools may need to meet those challenges
4. Strategies to lead a meaningful planning process with the school community

The executive director and I led attendees through a series of facilitated conversations in small and large groups over the course of the meeting. Central office and school-level leaders shared their experiences with planning under the previous NHPS SIP process and reflected on this revised strategic planning process. We collected feedback from central office and school leaders about what challenges they anticipated, changes we should consider, and resources or tools that would be helpful. Among the feedback we received was the need to clarify the non-negotiables and make more explicit to what degree the district would hold the schools accountable. Schools had the balanced progress report and would receive quarterly reports with academic and school-level data, but principals, in particular, were unsure about what the central office required under this new planning process as evidence of appropriate progress. As one principal in the P&L Review meeting said, “We just want you to be transparent. If you’re going to hold us accountable to something in particular, tell us” (personal communication).

In prior years, the district had set clear targets for academic gains on standardized tests and told schools which academic benchmarks they needed to hit. This year, and for these plans, the superintendent was encouraging schools to align their strategic objectives with district goals but to use “meaningful” data points to measure progress. He was not convinced that the current assessment system, particularly the quarterly content exams created by curriculum supervisors, was robust enough to be a mandate for each school to use as a benchmark of progress. This was particularly relevant at the middle school and high school levels, and it became a point of tension with the Academic Department. The P&L Review meeting highlighted the need to provide clearer guidance. I spent the following few weeks designing a SIP guidance document (see Appendix H for an excerpt from the NHPS SIP guidance document outlining non-negotiable items). Based on

the feedback we received from school leaders, the goals of the SIP guidance document were twofold: (1) to support school leaders in facilitating a school improvement planning process with their school communities and codifying some principles of strategic planning and improvement cycles and (2) to capture a shifting relationship between the central office and schools, particularly with regard to the autonomy that the superintendent was trying to encourage. When I began to put together the guidance document, the team verbally agreed on the first goal. The second goal, however, was more nebulous. While everyone on the team agreed in theory about the central office better supporting schools in their improvement efforts and planning processes, there was no explicit agreement about how that support might change the nature of interactions between the central office and school-based staff. Also, it wasn't clear how much flexibility schools would have as they completed the steps of the school improvement planning process (e.g., establishing strategic objectives) and moved toward execution. As another principal said during the P&L Review meeting, “This process for school planning is a paradigm shift. It’s going to require central office to work with schools differently” (personal communication).

One continuing point of discussion and tension as we launched the SIP process was what data to provide to schools and how to display that data. One member of our team expressed growing frustration that our Data Department was not giving high schools a quarterly tracker showing “trend data,” which compares one year’s performance to the next. Our Data Department was building a new system for high schools that provided student-level academic data, but as of early March 2015, the tools had not been disseminated to building leaders, and this team member was concerned that the data may not be the right data to consider for a school improvement plan.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> NHPS had a number of systems for looking at data. The use of these systems varied and there was not a clear plan for assessing usage and subsequently developing tools, training, and resources that streamlined access to school-level and student-level data and built capacity for using dynamic online data tools. One early point of concern from people on the senior leadership team was that the Data Department appeared to be introducing and building new data systems without a clear strategy for how these tools might be integrated with what already existed- or for

The type of data schools needed, and what systems should be used to look at the data, particularly at the high school level, continued to be a point of contention. I realized later in the project that it was also evidence that our team still disagreed about what was needed to write an effective, dynamic SIP. They also had concerns about the district's limited capacity to engage with school teams in the work of strategic planning and inquiry.

In mid-March 2015, we held an initial pre-planning session with some central office people to review how to support schools in conducting a needs assessment, which was the first step in the school improvement planning process (see Figure 6). It was scheduled to be a two-hour meeting led by the consultant and me, and included two directors of instruction, the deputy superintendent of Academics, the director of College and Career Readiness, the director of Talent, and curriculum supervisors. The original plan was to have one group focus on data from an elementary school and another group focus on data from a high school using the new tool built by the Data Department. The conversations at both tables digressed from the original agenda as attendees questioned the data, the benefit of doing a root cause analysis, and the ability of school leaders to use this data to identify areas for improvement; they also raised issues about training and capacity.

Subsequently, the executive director of Instruction, the consultant, and I led the first workshop with school teams on conducting a needs assessment. Ten members of the central office staff from the Academic, Talent, and School Support departments attended the workshop, and observed school teams using various protocols we had introduced during the session, with some members of central office sitting with school teams.

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the ways in which these tools might be replicating existing systems that were underutilized. One data team member said, "I have a number of pet projects that I work on and that I think will help schools. Since we aren't really a department, there is no strategy for how we think about our data systems; I just do what people above me tell me they need and then do what I think schools will find helpful" (personal communication).

#### *TURNING POINT 4: CONNECTING THE WORK ACROSS FUNCTIONAL AREAS*

##### **The Talent Department**

In refreshing the school improvement planning process, I recognized an opportunity to create stronger connections and coherence between other streams of work and district initiatives underway. Portions of the project were initially envisioned as a relatively technical charge<sup>10</sup> (that is, to develop a school improvement planning template and timeline for schools), but the project also provided leverage for connecting work across departments and traditional silos. As part of the district's talent strategy, during the 2014-2015 school year, NHPS created expanded roles for principals, including mentor, coach, and network facilitator. Administrators who applied and were selected as network facilitators were trained to lead communities of practice with their colleagues during monthly district-wide meetings for principals. Recognizing an opportunity to build capacity among NHPS principals, and to utilize their expertise, the director of Talent and I began meeting to find ways to align the work of school improvement planning with these newly created roles and communities of practice. We worked with a trainer from the Connecticut Center for School Change to develop a workshop for network facilitators, training them to facilitate conversations with school leaders about the strategic improvement process. At the roll-out of the school improvement planning process, which took place at the superintendent's meeting in early February 2015, these network facilitators led working sessions with their colleagues and school teams. In addition, the superintendent tasked the Talent Department with finding ways to promote

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<sup>10</sup> During a conversation I had with the superintendent in mid-fall 2014, the superintendent said, "It shouldn't take long to put together a school improvement template for schools to fill out and turn in. I worry that you're overthinking this." I voiced my concerns and shared that this initiative needed to be focused on more than just creating a template for schools to complete. Focusing on the template would risk reinforcing a compliance orientation; it would miss an opportunity to shift the nature of the partnership between central office and schools and to use the SIP as a lever for real improvement.

in schools and across the district more deliberate, meaningful professional learning opportunities for educators. In mid-February 2015, following the roll-out of the SIP process, I began to work with the Talent Department on how to incorporate this initiative into the school improvement planning process at the schools. What followed from these meetings was a superintendent's meeting in March 2015 that focused on designing professional learning time with the priorities and strategies schools had identified through their school improvement planning process. At this meeting, principals discussed the teachers' contract and considered ways to rearrange 70 minutes of unencumbered contract time to align with a school's priorities and strategies for improvement. We had included in the SIP guidance document some consideration of flexibility in the union contract that allow for the design of professional learning and the creation of collaborative time.

Given limited time and feeling an urgency to make the connections between work streams for schools as soon as possible, I elected to not explicitly engage the core SIP team in this collaboration with the Talent Department. Rather, as we made decisions or strengthened connections between these two initiatives, the director of Talent and I updated the team at our weekly team meetings about the connections being made.

### **Strategic Infrastructure**

While I was working closely with members of the Talent Department to identify links between the school improvement initiative and the district's talent strategy, I also began to work with the chief financial officer to identify ways in which the district could align the budgeting process with the school improvement planning process and with the district's work on strategic school design. One prominent piece of feedback we heard during our P&L Review meeting in January 2015, and in one-on-one conversations with school leaders, concerned the disconnect between school improvement planning and resource allocation. Part of this, the team recognized, was due to principals not necessarily recognizing the flexibility they had to move resources of time, people, and money at their schools.



In spring 2014, NHPS partnered with the consulting firm Education Resource Strategies (ERS) to analyze an extensive set of data in support of the design and implementation of strategies that better align resources with student needs and district goals. In early 2015, after the superintendent sent me an email suggesting I connect with the ERS consultant, I recognized an opportunity to use the school improvement planning process as an occasion to deepen the district conversation about strategic school design and alignment with budget. The consultant and I discussed how NHPS could be more deliberate in its organization of a school's resources to optimize student outcomes, including differentiating teacher roles and assignments, implementing flexible scheduling, creating effective teacher teams, and redesigning the central office to support increased school autonomy. In early March 2015, as we rolled out a series of workshops for school principals focused on the different phases of the school improvement planning process, we held our fourth P&L Review meeting for School Portfolio Supports. The meeting focused on the framework for strategic school design and engaged a cross-section of stakeholders in a deeper conversation, tying together the strategic school design work currently underway through multiple streams within NHPS and laying the groundwork for the findings on school-level resource use by ERS.

The conversation at the P&L Review meetings flagged some important differences in how individuals in the central office viewed their roles and the autonomy given to schools. During a discussion of a case study of an NHPS high school that had modified English Language Acquisition intervention time for students entering ninth grade with reading skills below grade level, on supervisor said, "The state exams are what we're held accountable to; what I'm held accountable to. We can't let schools make those sorts of intervention decisions" (personal communication, 2015). At this meeting the superintendent, director of instruction, and I reinforced the message that, although the state exams are an accountability measure to be considered, the district must consider granting schools more autonomy and move from a central

office focused on compliance monitoring to a strategic partner that helps schools examine their broader school designs and the implications for teaching and learning. Simply handing schools a curriculum, requiring all schools to follow the same schedule, and telling them what to do were not going to improve teaching and personalized learning experiences for students.

We established a foundation for collaboration between the school portfolio support and strategic infrastructure initiatives. However, more work is necessary to streamline and align processes between the departments to support a more timely and coordinated school planning process and infrastructure for school improvement.

Figure 7 is a chart of key actions that unfolded during the strategic project through mid-March 2015.

Overview of the Strategic Project Implementation	
Date	Actions
<b>October 2014</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create work plan for portfolio initiatives. Establish standing meetings between the deputy superintendent, talent director, and directors of instruction.</li> <li>• Create initial draft of a school performance framework, including the creation of a balanced progress report for each district school.</li> <li>• One-on-one meetings with principals and two roundtable meetings with principals, assistant principals, and curriculum supervisors to collect feedback about the prior SIP process.</li> <li>• P&amp;L Review meeting to focus on the draft of the new school performance framework.</li> <li>• Attend reform committee meeting to receive feedback from union and parent representatives on the school performance framework.</li> </ul>
<b>December 2014</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Winter retreat with core SIP team to design a theory of action, identify guiding principles of an improvement planning process, and sketch a framework for strategic school planning.</li> <li>• Develop initial SIP template.</li> <li>• Continue meeting with school leaders to gather feedback on their current school improvement practices.</li> </ul>

## Overview of the Strategic Project Implementation

<b>January 2015</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• P&amp;L Review meeting to present the SIP framework, guiding principles, and template to a cross-section of stakeholders including teachers, administrators, and central office staff. Make revisions based on feedback.</li> <li>• Begin to outline school-based SIP workshops based on feedback from school leaders.</li> <li>• Conversations with superintendent, deputy superintendent of academics, and directors of instruction to reach agreement on academic non-negotiables.</li> <li>• Collaborate with director of talent to train administrators in expanded roles to facilitate group discussions with colleagues about the school improvement planning process. Begin developing tools and resources, including workshop modules school leaders can use with their school teams, to support the SIP planning process at the school level.</li> </ul>
<b>February 2015</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Officially roll out the school improvement planning process and template to all administrators at the superintendent's meeting.</li> <li>• Roll out SIP process for assistant principals at training workshop.</li> <li>• Build a platform using Google Drive for sharing and disseminating tools and resources to support the school improvement planning process.</li> <li>• In response to administrator feedback, write a guidance document for schools to use as they facilitate the planning process with school teams. Included are the non-negotiables.</li> <li>• Begin collaborating with the CFO and ERS Consulting to align the school planning initiative with the district's broader school design and resource allocation work streams underway.</li> <li>• Coordinate with the district's data team to produce the data schools need to conduct a thorough needs assessment. Take data team to NYC for a session with New Visions for Public Schools to learn about its data systems.</li> </ul>
<b>March 2015</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate "Conducting a Needs Assessment" workshops for central office support staff and school teams.</li> <li>• Continue to add tools and resources to the Google Drive.</li> <li>• P&amp;L Review meeting to present a framework for strategic school design, along with analysis from ERS. Discuss the ways in which schools can think about allocation of time, people, money, and technology, and the power strategies they can utilize, as they begin the school improvement planning process and analyze their data and trends.</li> </ul>

**Figure 7: Timeline of Key Actions of the Strategic Project**

## THE RESULTS

Through the redesign of the district's school improvement planning process, my Strategic Project focused on two goals: (1) enhancing cross-functional work within the central office to strengthen the ways in which central office staff members work with one another to execute a strategic initiative and (2) shifting the partnership and relationship among central office and schools to improve teaching and learning. As mentioned in my RKA, the ultimate goal of school improvement planning, and strategic planning in general, is to help schools and organizations become more introspective as they develop systems for continuous improvement that support thriving schools and learning experiences for all children. Given the short timeline of my strategic project, my theory of action focused on creating the conditions for a team to develop an organizational process that brings coherence to its collective efforts at improvement. It also attempted to focus on building the team's capacity to plan strategically.

Using the research from my RKA, I collected results in three main categories in connection with my theory of action: structures and systems, commitment and collective responsibility, and organizational capacity. The Results section also includes a description of the teaming practices developed by the SIP working team.

### *STRUCTURES AND SYSTEMS*

Curtis and City (2009) state that one of the key building blocks for effective strategy execution is organizing the work with clear structures and systems. They suggest three in particular: a logic model, an implementation plan, and an after-action review or similar feedback loop. I attempted to build and use all three structures in my strategic project.

The P&L Review meetings and framework launched in the fall created a structure and an incentive for cross-functional work teams to form within the central office. In an attempt to

manage the School Portfolio Supports initiatives and to create structures to support the rhythm of work necessary to execute the SIP initiative, I wrote a work plan for the various SIP initiatives in early October 2014. Because this group of senior leaders had not previously developed a work plan together, I told the directors of instruction that I was creating this work plan to outline our next steps. I emailed the work plan to members of our team and included a description of the deliverables, outline of goals, action steps, timeline, and the owner/lead responsible for tracking specific work. One member of our team replied to this email as follows:

I thought X and I were to work on [this initiative]. I would like for us to be transparent in communication of changes in responsibilities rather than seeing it on paper. It is somewhat disrespectful. Just let me know in advance because my time could be used to focus on other things. The X initiative was also thrown off without any explanation. If it is not seen as a priority, all folks have to do is let me know. It is like you guys talk with the superintendent and come with the plans and ideas to share. So, what is the purpose of our meeting together? It seems to me that plans and the deep thinking have already occurred in a different forum (personal communication, 2014).

Three other members replied by thanking me for the work plan and the clarity it provided. After receiving the email above and speaking with some members of the team, I removed the “owner/lead” column from the project plan. Rather than emailing the revised copy to members of the team, I met with each member individually to go over the work plan, emphasizing that these initiatives required a team to complete them and that the project plan was a tool to help us stay on track (see Appendix I for the work plan). All members of the team were receptive to the work plan after I met with them individually and walked them through the different components.

Most elements of the work plan were executed on schedule, but a number of additional tasks were added as the project expanded in scope and began to intersect with other district initiatives. Highlighted in green in the work plan in Appendix I are SIP initiative tasks that were completed or are on track to be completed by the end of the residency, as well as a number of tasks added after the original work plan was created.

At our first meeting I had tried to walk the team through a logic model exercise for the SIP initiative. Members of the team had not worked with a logic model before, and a few of them

grew frustrated because we were not discussing concrete things such as when the SIP would be due and what the template would look like. As a result, I pivoted, shared the initial feedback we had received from school leaders during our two roundtables, and then had the team brainstorm about why school improvement planning was important and the intended outcome of having schools complete a SIP (that is, the intended results section of the logic model) (see Appendix J for the SIP logic model). This moved the group past focusing solely on the compliance aspects of SIPs—designing the template and setting a timeline for when it would be due—to the broader goals of the initiative and the impact we hoped it would have. Feeling pressed for time, I ended up creating the logic model by myself and then meeting individually with members of the team to review it and receive feedback. Members of the team were receptive to the one-on-one meetings and liked the idea of a logic model once it was explained. City and Curtis recommend that a team of people develop a logic model. By doing it alone and then showing it to members afterward for feedback, I missed an opportunity to strengthen the team’s ability to develop a strategic road map collectively and take joint ownership of the direction of the initiative.

When we set up the P&L Review structure, several senior leaders complained about the number of meetings they had to attend and about not being able to visit schools as often as they wanted. Knowing that it was critical to have this team meet regularly, and that the meetings were a valuable and strategic use of their time and my time, I gave team members of the team a list of meeting dates at a specific time every other week. I outlined the purpose of each meeting and reiterated the charge for the team. Team members agreed to this schedule and that I should design each agenda. There was a 95% attendance rate (with most members attending every meeting), and at 90% of the meetings, we met the stated objectives or intended outcomes on the agenda.

In an attempt to maintain structure, I incorporated multiple opportunities to collect feedback from stakeholders and regularly brought that feedback to our working team to consider. I was not able to build a cycle for formal after-action reviews where we analyzed our own process

as a team, how we interacted with one another, and whether we had achieved the intended results. However, from analyzing feedback at three different points (the initial feedback from the roundtable meetings in the fall, feedback received during the January P&L Review meeting, and feedback from the February superintendent's meeting) the team did make modifications and changes to the SIP process, timeline, and workshop model (see Appendix K and Appendix L for feedback from the P&L Review meetings and superintendent's meeting). The somewhat nimble structure allowed us to move from having a single due date for the SIP to having a window of time for schools to turn in different sections. We also added a feedback loop between the central office and schools in which the central office staff provided feedback to schools on their different sections of the SIP. We revised the content and frequency of the SIP workshops (see Appendix M) to align with feedback from principals about where they needed more support.

### *COMMITMENT AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY*

Collective responsibility is the idea that every member who participates in a decision-making group is equally responsible for contributing to and being responsible for the decisions made and outcomes (Business Dictionary, 2015).

At the start of this project, our team outlined the following charge for this initiative:

The work of the central office should be designed around the work of schools, ensuring that principals, faculty, and staff have support and resources to meet the needs of their students. The SIP initiative will involve reviewing and revising the process by which schools develop, refine, and receive feedback on a clearly articulated SIP that defines the school's own unique path to success. This working committee will collaborate to design systems and tools that will best organize and support schools in successfully implementing their SIPs and cycles of continuous improvement.

As outlined in the strategic project description, I was also able to lead the team in articulating a theory of action, establishing core principles of a planning process, and developing

recommended steps a school should take to create a SIP. Through the facilitation of a series of meetings, the team outlined questions a school might ask during each step of the planning process. Collectively generating these steps, and outlining the accompanying questions schools might ask, were leading indicators that the team was beginning to think about improvement planning as more than a compliance exercise; the team had begun to think of it as a process that supports continuous and ongoing improvement. Team members also made a strong commitment to engage in the process of designing the SIP, as evidenced by the high attendance at our biweekly planning meetings and the meetings where we collected feedback (the P&L Review meetings), as well as the 93% return rate for the emails I sent to team members concerning the SIP process.

Michael Fullan asserts that changes in beliefs follow changes in behavior, and changes in behavior happen as a result of “purposeful experiences” (Fullan, 2011). Given the feedback we received early on from school leaders about the district's prior SIPs being compliance-driven, as well as knowing we were trying to shift the manner in which central office leadership worked with one another, I attempted to engage the team in “purposeful experiences” that supported principles of highly effective teams. This included revisiting the core principles and working through conflicts in order to agree on steps that schools should take when strategically planning. With the help of the consultant who co-facilitated a few of our meetings, I was able to use different protocols in early meetings to bring clarity to the school improvement planning process, the role of the central office, and our theory of action. However, some members of the team did not remember specifics of our theory of action, and therefore the theory of action was not an effective tool to help the team think about the work we were doing. I did not include the theory of action on agendas or in meetings that we held after the December 2014 retreat. When I reminded our team in late January 2015 about the theory of action we wrote, all six members commented that they recalled writing a theory of action back in December but did not remember what it said.



That meeting was a turning point, for the reasons previously stated, but some of its lessons appeared to be short-term, and I was not intentional enough about making sure we as a team were keeping our theory for the work we were doing at the forefront of our discussions and decisions.

There was mixed evidence to suggest that every member of the team felt collective ownership of the results of implementing the SIP initiative (including leading and planning workshops and professional development opportunities), and not everyone felt comfortable explaining the process we created to school leaders or members of their departments. Up through March 2015, whenever questions arose about the SIP, most often they were directed toward me, as evidenced by email correspondence and the fact that members of our team often came to me for clarification if a principal or school had a question about the SIP process. Also, team members who led departments asked me to come to their department meetings to explain the SIP process and answer questions. While I initially viewed this as evidence that team members did not collectively own the SIP initiative or feel comfortable with it, I later came to understand that this was a step toward creating more cross-functional alignment. At these department meetings, I was able to describe the SIP process and outline the ways in which I saw it connecting to the work of that particular department. Furthermore, as a result of meeting with the curriculum supervisors in early March 2015 at their weekly meeting, six of the twelve supervisors attended the pre-planning training session on conducting a needs assessment the following week and seven of the twelve attended the workshop with school teams.

However, to break the cycle of business as usual in the central office, and to enhance collective responsibility for how NHPS supports schools in improving, the team will need to tackle questions such as these:

What are the most essential services we can provide to schools that are likely to improve substantially the quality of classroom teaching and meet the goals outlined in their plan? What can we do, including brokering services from other providers, to build a system of supports for schools based not on what we have always done or what current staff can do well, but on what our main customers – the schools – need to improve? How can we use

a school's SIP as input to help us differentiate support based on the school's particular needs and better understand district-wide needs? (Honig, 2013).

One goal of engaging the team in the creation of the SIP process was to support a shift in the role and relationship that central office leadership and departments had with schools. This would actualize the shared accountability and support framework developed in fall 2014, which stated that the district would build stronger support teams and provide both effective tools and flexibility of implementation. The results indicate that this shift was more successful with some departments than with others. For the Talent Department in particular, the expanded roles we created were successfully aligned with the SIP process. In mid-January 2015, we trained six principals in the new SIP process and had them facilitate small group discussions at our P&L Review meeting and then at the superintendent's meeting. The feedback from the February superintendent's meeting indicated that principals thought the new SIP process was valuable, they appreciated the time to work with and be led by peers, and they wanted more time to understand the steps of the SIP process and see models. The Talent Department, which had been charged by the superintendent to help principals think through the use of professional learning time on their campuses, reached out in mid-February 2015 to collaborate on connecting that conversation with the SIP initiative.<sup>11</sup> Further evidence of increased cross-functional alignment and the strengthening of support teams was that the Talent Department and I worked together to design the March superintendent's meeting as an opportunity to integrate the SIP initiative with the professional learning initiative. We also added a page to the SIP guidance document outlining how to think about professional learning needs in relationship to a school's needs assessment and

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<sup>11</sup> Of note, the director of talent and I both started working in the central office during the same month and ended up sharing the same office the superintendent used to occupy as an assistant superintendent. As a result, we regularly had informal conversations that led us to recognize points of connection between the talent strategies and the school portfolio support strategies, as well as areas where alignment was not, but should be, happening.

improvement plan. Feedback from the March superintendent's meeting showed that principals recognized the increased alignment between these two central office initiatives. After this meeting, a talent associate asked about meeting again so we could continue to align the SIP initiative with the talent work.

### *ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY*

As noted earlier, despite the lack of a formal document or "official" agreement by the team, I ended up becoming the de facto leader and coordinator for most of the tasks associated with developing the SIP process. This fact had several consequences. First, I led most of the tasks associated with developing infrastructure to support schools in completing the SIP process (e.g., creating the guidance document, leading and developing the workshops with the consultant, developing the SIP toolkit for schools to use, drafting the SIP template). This did little to build the professional capacity of other team members to support schools in a strategic planning process and, more importantly, in the implementation of the plan that follows. Given the research on SIPs and my own personal experience with school planning, I was convinced that the power of the SIP as a district strategy to drive school improvement rested in its implementation and in schools' adoption of collaborative inquiry. It was dependent on the instructional central office team being intimately aware of the improvement work happening in schools, organized in ways to be a strategic partner in these efforts, and able to reinforce for each school the concept that the SIP should be created by and for a school team and used a dynamic road map. The team I was leading, and those that team members were leading within the central office, needed to be well-prepared and able to facilitate inquiry-based school reform. Up to this point, little had been done to ensure adequate capacity for this sort of central office support to schools.

Second, my leadership may have reinforced a tendency within NHPS for particular people or departments to "own" initiatives rather than initiatives being designed and implemented

in cross-functional ways. Being asked to discuss the SIP at department meetings, and having members of multiple departments attend the workshops with schools, was evidence of progress. However, the SIP was still seen as deeply tied to my leadership and me, rather than deeply seated in the organization and collectively owned. For instance, a member of one department commented to me in mid-March 2015, “This is a nice project and important. But once you leave, all this work you’re doing, this shift in how we’re thinking about SIPs, can’t be sustained. It’s your project. That’s why I don’t want to invest too much” (personal communication, 2015). Leading and coordinating most of the tasks allowed me to orient the work toward continuous improvement and toward establishing a culture of inquiry rather than compliance. However, it is hard to predict whether this approach will be self-sustaining if there is a different leader or no leader to carry it forward.

I have little direct evidence that the team built collective capacity to understand how to perform the steps of the improvement planning process and how to support schools in that process. For instance, while discussing the needs assessment, which was the first phase we recommended that the schools complete, the group continued to grapple with what data to give schools, particularly high schools. Most team members were unfamiliar, and initially uncomfortable, with conducting and facilitating a root cause analysis. Although the schools had access to a number of data systems and tools, there was growing concern that the schools did not have the right data to understand how they needed to improve. At the P&L Review meeting in January 2015, and at the superintendent’s meeting in February 2015, school leaders asked for additional support with data analysis. As mentioned earlier, we received the same feedback on the central office survey at the end of the SY 2013-2014. When the team discussed the feedback, we concluded that it was a problem we needed to address. However, the team struggled to come up with ideas to help schools besides just giving them more data. Instead, I took the feedback and, with the consultant, organized a needs assessment workshop for the central office staff, and then

the schools, to help them with data analysis. The workshops became a capacity-building opportunity; they gave team members and the central office instructional team a chance to become more familiar with processes for identifying needs related to student learning and to use inquiry to narrow and refine the focus. However, a one-time training session was far from sufficient to build the organizational capacity needed to support schools.

Boudett et al., in *Data Wise*, note the critical role central offices and districts play in helping schools to improve and to make constructive use of student assessment results and data. They also argue the importance of central office teams having the capacity to model the work (Boudett, City, & Murnane, 2013). While there is strong evidence to indicate that the team I led was able to create a new SIP design and reach agreement about some processes for supporting schools in completing the steps outlined, other evidence suggests that many members of the team still had questions about the best way to support school teams in completing a thorough needs assessment, how to identify potential root causes for growth areas, and then to develop a coherent strategy to address these root causes. This is illustrated by two representative comments made at the meeting in mid-March 2015 with central office staff to prepare for the needs assessment workshop with schools. One team member said, “I’m not really sure about the role I’m going to be able to play or curriculum supervisors can play. We can tell schools if they pick the wrong objective or aren’t analyzing the data right. But other than telling them what data to look at, I don’t see how a root cause analysis is going to help. We need to tell them what they need to achieve and then just have them write action steps to do that.” Another member stated, “This is too complicated. We need to give them simple trend data that shows what’s happened over years. How did this year’s ninth graders do compared to last year’s ninth graders? You’re going to overwhelm principals asking them to find root causes. We just need to tell them their targets.” A curriculum supervisor said, “I’m not really sure how to help principals or school teams determine their needs. I just look at instruction. I’m here just to see if you need me.” These comments made

me wonder how successful we were in building the capacity of our team and other central office staff to support meaningful school improvement planning that set the conditions to support continuous cycles of inquiry.<sup>12</sup> They also raised the fundamental question, What is success in this context? Comprehensive research, detailed analysis, and hard work were dedicated to this project. We made progress and achieved beneficial results. The act of planning, be it school improvement planning or district strategic planning, is an important foundation for organizing people around a common vision for the work. However, more is needed. The dynamic nature of the plan's implementation, the mechanisms and structures set up to learn from its implementation, and the system's capacity to act in a focused and coherent way to improve student learning will ultimately determine the extent to which that plan will be a lever for school improvement (Curtis & City, 2009). A systemic transformation in less than nine months was a high hurdle, and I need more time to teach and learn at NHPS.

## ANALYSIS

The most central issue for leaders is to understand the deeper levels of a culture, to assess the functionality of the assumptions made at that level, and to deal with the anxiety that is unleashed when those assumptions are challenged.

—Edgar Schein (2010, p. 33)

My strategic project centered on answering the question, How can an urban school district use school improvement planning to enhance cross-functional work within the central office, and the partnership between the central office and schools, to improve teaching and

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<sup>12</sup> Recognizing that in addition to building technical skills, it was critical to build stakeholder support, I developed regular feedback loops between the team and me as well as between a broader set of central office and district stakeholders and me. Appendix N is a strategy stakeholder map that I used to think through generating support while working with particular sets of stakeholders.

learning? In this section of my capstone, I analyze the actions and conditions that allowed me to move an initiative successfully from an initial idea to the early stages of implementation; I also look at how the feedback I collected impacted the direction of the initiative and the mechanisms I leveraged to create that impact. I analyze the results to date to identify key findings and make revisions to my theory of action based on results that are not fully supported by my initial theory of action. I focus my analysis on the leadership actions I took that leveraged the district's organizational conditions and enabled my strategic project to move toward implementation.

#### *CREATE AN AUTHORIZING ENVIRONMENT AND BUILD LEGITIMACY AND SUPPORT*

Mark Moore defines an authorizing environment as “those actors from whom managers need authorization and resources to survive and be effective” (Moore, 1997). The reality of public management and leadership is that it often happens within the context of chaotic authorizing environments. When I entered NHPS, many people reinforced the importance of building relationships and earning trust in order to survive and to move the work ahead. Before I started as a resident, the superintendent shared the following advice: “Look for early wins that are causing [senior leaders] stress and that you can take off their plate. Quick transactional stuff” (personal communication, 2014). Another mentor advised, “Pay attention to who is moving the work. Pay attention to who is feared. Pay attention to who is respected. Try and understand why, and pay attention to who and what makes people move into action” (personal communication, 2014).

During my first few weeks in the organization, I noticed two key influences that moved people to action: authority (or appearance thereof) and relationships. If the superintendent, or someone higher up in the organizational hierarchy, or someone who was (or appeared to be) acting on behalf of the superintendent made a request or gave a directive, people tended to listen and act. Additionally, existing relationships with others often moved people to action. This was challenging to me as a new resident because my position, responsibilities, and reporting structure

were somewhat vague. I observed a healthy skepticism (if not cynicism) about me as an outsider from Harvard who had worked with charter schools. As a result, I knew I needed to be intentional and strategic about building relationships and earning the trust of those in the central office. In thinking through the stakeholder map described in the Results section (Appendix N), I paid special attention to building relationships with those on the senior leadership team whose work was most closely tied to supporting schools. It was obvious that investing time to cultivate these strategic relationships was critical. I was also deliberate about building relationships with school leaders in these first few months, recognizing that only gaining the school leaders' trust would allow my work to penetrate the instructional core.

To build this trust and establish legitimacy to lead, I initially took a general stance of inquiry: asking questions, listening, and attempting to understand people's perspectives on their work. I also tried to create connections through shared past experiences. I deliberately tried to appear nonthreatening and yet deeply knowledgeable about the work of teaching and learning. For example, early in my residency I stepped in to help an executive team member lead redesign efforts at two NHPS comprehensive high schools, which was something I done in previous roles. I helped another executive team member complete a state-required budget proposal to ensure the release of significant funding to the district, and I created a series of agendas and other project management templates to help senior leaders track work. I visited with principals to learn more about their experiences leading a school within NHPS. Two months into my residency, at the opening-of-school meeting for administrators, all new central office leaders gave a three-minute introduction. Using the lessons I'd learned from Marshall Ganz's Harvard Kennedy School course on community organizing, I shared my "story of self" and what motivated me to be an educator. After the meeting, a number of administrators thanked me for sharing my experiences as a teacher and school leader, and for "humanizing" my role in New Haven. These early wins earned me



some social and political capital within the central office and among the schools, and enhanced my legitimacy as I began to lead the strategic project.

As previously stated, the ambiguity of my role and responsibilities as a resident was an initial source of concern and frustration for some, including me. However, upon reflection, I recognize that this ambiguity, and the amorphous nature of my responsibilities, created space for me to leverage my position in order to establish and define my authority. Being one of the architects of the P&L Review framework added significance to me and my position. Veteran members of the organization saw the P&L Review framework as a directive from the superintendent and therefore something the district needed to “get right.” When senior leaders had questions about the process, they often came to me seeking clarity about what the superintendent intended. Once the P&L Review framework was created and the key initiatives articulated on paper, the superintendent, his executive manager of strategy and coordination, and I met with each executive team member and project manager to review the new structure. These meetings helped to position me as someone who was operating on the superintendent's behalf and supporting the execution of his vision.

It also helped that my fluid role and responsibilities involved different departments, which provided me with information and connections across the organization. Bolman and Deal observed, “Power flows to those with the information and know-how to solve important problems” (2013, p. 203). As I acquired more information, made connections between streams of work, answered questions, and navigated complex networks of individuals to move work early in my tenure, many people started to view me as an ally who could get things done. As mentioned, notable support for this characterization came with my ability to create and ultimately implement the P&L Review framework. The framework was considered a critical change of course from prior years and, even though it can (and should) be improved in numerous ways, it became a key structure during the school year. Ultimately, the success of this work, the time I took to build

relationships and gain information across the organization, and my ability to operate within a flexible space created by the superintendent prior to starting the strategic project in mid-November 2014 provided me with a relatively strong authorizing environment to bring people together to redesign the school improvement planning process.

### *CONSIDER THE CONTEXT AND MANAGE THE PARADOXES*

Given the history of school improvement planning within the district, I faced little resistance to pulling together the team to work on this initiative. Unlike the school leaders, senior central office leaders on this team believed that the prior SIP process was strong and an important factor in the success of the original School Change initiative. For the past two years, there had been no formal school improvement planning process for most schools, and many team members were eager to see a formal SIP template reinstituted.<sup>13</sup> This contextual factor helped tremendously to get the initiative off the ground, with team members willing to commit time and energy to its creation. Furthermore, given the nature of compliance within the district, the fact that the superintendent named this as one of the initiatives to focus on for SY 2014-2015 created a sense of urgency that helped to build necessary momentum.

However, while the basic creation of a school improvement plan was not controversial within this group, difficulties did emerge when I tried to move the team away from thinking about this initiative as creating a SIP template and toward thinking about it as creating a more dynamic school improvement planning process. The district was trained in the Doug Reeves Data Teams process years earlier and had been required by the state to have a District Data Team that looked at data on a quarterly basis. However, a deeply embedded culture of improvement did not

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<sup>13</sup> One set of NHPS schools had received grant money from the Connecticut State Department of Education as part of an initiative to support the state's lowest-performing schools. These schools were required to complete a state-mandated SIP.

permeate the organization and there was a lack of knowledge about how to facilitate and support collaborative inquiry. Curtis and City assert that compliance is a way of deflecting responsibility and protecting oneself from fragmented, cacophonous systems that don't make sense (2009, p. 181). While I attempted to have the team engage in its own cycle of inquiry at different stages in the process (looking at data and feedback, identifying patterns, and thinking through root causes) some members of the team either became defensive or avoided discussing the implications for how the central office staff members do their work. As a new leader, I did not push those difficult conversations enough with the whole team. I limited my inquiry partly out of my concern about what the reaction would be from some team members and partly out of my uncertainty about what my role should be in the organization.

The history of NHPS is one in which power was relatively concentrated and conflict viewed as potentially undermining the leadership's ability to function. On numerous occasions, central office senior leaders recounted stories about the former superintendent "simply telling us what to do and we did it" (personal communication). The organization also had a history of carefully tracking performance outcomes, likely due in part to pressure from the state and other authorities to show growth on particular outcome measures. However, it did not have a culture in which the central office departments regularly assessed their own effectiveness by diving in, focusing on a few things, and then stepping back to reflect, refine, and share adjustments.<sup>14</sup> The current superintendent urged "creative tension," seeing well-handled disagreement as something that can stimulate ingenuity, innovation, and improvement. However, making this shift and

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<sup>14</sup> The NHPS teacher evaluation development and growth system received national attention and its principal evaluation and growth system was considered adequate. The district's central office development and growth system was relatively weak in comparison. Central office departments did not have clearly articulated, or commonly known, key performance indicators or goals to monitor beyond standardized test scores, and there was limited evidence of regular feedback and development conversations between supervisors and those being supervised.

asking people to reflect on their work and the work of the organization (e.g., “Is what we are doing working for children and schools? How do we know? What adjustments might we need to make?”) created discomfort and fear.

Change, or altering course, seemed to imply a value judgment. As one member of the team commented, “We need to honor what we did in the past. People worked really hard, and changing things sends a signal that what we did wasn’t good. We need to support schools better, but that doesn’t mean needing to change how we do things. We just need to add more support” (personal communication, 2014). I did not recognize as early as I should have the ways in which this initiative, and how I was framing it, pushed up against alternative frames that were comfortable and familiar to members of the team. When we began our work together as a team, I did not take the time to acknowledge the strengths of the previous SIP template or the system in place. As a result, I appeared to be introducing a new initiative, which generated initial questioning and skepticism. Pivoting to frame the work of the team and the initiative as “deepening and extending” the previous SIP process and larger NHPS strategy for school improvement enabled me to move the group forward. However, it is not clear that moving the team forward enabled individual team members to consider their own role and practices, and the roles and practices of those within their departments, in relationship to helping schools improve.

With three new members on the senior leadership team (the new CFO, talent director, and me), a newly revised district vision (including newly worded core values), a new School Change 2.0 document, a new set of strategic initiatives and structure for periodic monitoring, and a relatively new mayor placing pressure on the district to show results, I failed to recognize the ways in which my leading this initiative could potentially be viewed as just one more example of change for the sake of change. This may have added to the uncertainty people were already feeling about my role and their own roles in the organization. As shown in the email that voiced frustration about the work plan and “owners ” (quoted in the Results section), there was a sense of

shifting dynamics as new people with different training, experiences, and capabilities were entering the organization and beginning to ask questions about certain organizational practices.

In comparison, the alignment and collaboration that took place between the talent initiative and SIP initiative benefited from talent being a new department with no institutional history or existing systems and processes to disrupt. In fact, the Talent Department was created in order to be somewhat disruptive of the dominant central office culture. Members of that department (all former school-based NHPS employees, new to the central office within the last twelve months) had experienced firsthand frustration with a central office that appeared more adept at monitoring and compliance functions than with functions necessary to support the growth and development of individuals and schools. As one member of the talent team asserted, “Great teaching and learning happens in NHPS when principals and teachers learn how to ignore much of what central office sends our way. It’s about building as big of a moat as possible between central office and your school or classroom.” Another noted, “Innovation and growth are happening at the school level. However, the central office seems to behave much the same way it has behaved for the past 20 years. There are particular individuals within central office who see the world differently. But overall as a unit, central office has not changed with School Change.” Members of the talent team were experienced at the building level, they were motivated, and they had come “downtown” to try to disrupt the central office culture.

Change requires trust and risk-taking, and it requires acknowledging and anticipating the loss individuals experience as a result of change. The contradictions people expressed, such as wanting to support schools better but not necessarily wanting to change the ways in which the work happens, were indications of this uncertainty and sense of loss. Heifetz et al., in their framework on adaptive leadership, say, “When change involves real or potential loss, people hold on to what they have and resist the change” (2009, p. 10). My leadership required that I be able to help team members, particularly veteran members, to adapt and grow. This meant that I needed to

acknowledge the district's history, identity, values, and norms, and then incorporate the best from those traditions into the process in order to help the team feel comfortable with new routines, trade-offs, levels of uncertainty, and experimentation. As I will address in more detail in the Implications for Self section, I found this to be a difficult balance to maintain. I often worried that the team was not moving forward with enough boldness or recognition of where growth was needed, preferring instead to accept the relative security of the status quo.

There was also a puzzle to manage regarding the organizational capacity needed to effectively execute and support the process that the team built. The team developed and agreed to a process by which schools, in theory, would have access to a robust set of resources and infrastructure to support their strategic planning process (e.g., workshops; a SIP Toolkit with tools and resources; school-based support; feedback loops between schools and central office on their plans and identified needs, strategies, and action steps). Even more importantly, the improvement strategy that schools were writing needed to be supported in its execution. On the one hand, this was a move toward a culture of collective responsibility, with certain departments and roles within the central office taking on more of a service orientation. However, new educational processes and tools are only effective if used well. While the process we designed and the core principles we outlined suggest that this team was beginning to recognize the importance of building systems to support schools in strategic planning and collective inquiry cycles to drive improvement, the ability of people in the central office to support these cycles of inquiry and strategic planning was limited. As a result, the consultant, executive director of instruction, and I built most of the tools, led the workshops, and engaged in the majority of intense coaching with the highest-need schools and school teams. The team's willingness to let me lead significant portions of the work increased the legitimacy and support I was building within the organization, but it also allowed others to continue to do their work in the same way they always had. The short-term nature of the residency made it difficult to determine how best to

create capability within the central office. For example, the needs assessment workshop highlighted pretty significant gaps in staff's ability to analyze data. My own ability to balance results with creating capacity, all in a safe and non-threatening adult learning environment, was particularly challenging and led to mixed results.

In an analysis completed by ERS in fall 2014, a key finding was that NHPS central office is relatively lean compared to peer districts in the study. The analysis of peer district data by ERS predicted that NHPS would spend nearly two times what it spends on central office given its size and funding level. A key question for the district is, given its staffing levels, how much it can deliver core functions efficiently and not hinder operational effectiveness.

#### *DON'T UNDERESTIMATE CULTURE*

At the district level, the superintendent was seeking a culture and paradigm shift away from silos and compliance-driven thinking and toward a more integrated approach, in which the central office enabled student and adult learning across the system. This became a particularly challenging task because the shift was necessarily encased in tradition, inertia, culture, and law. The PELP coherence framework suggests that successful district strategy needs to align culture, structure, stakeholders, systems, and resources with an articulated vision of instruction. Culture, or the predominant beliefs and norms that define and drive behavior in an organization, can have profound impacts on the development and success of a group within it (Childress, Elmore, & Grossman, 2004).

The predominant culture of the NHPS central office reflected norms and behaviors consistent with a command-and-control function. This was likely because the central office was historically the arbiter of resources and instructional decisions. Schools and principals felt they

had little discretion over either.<sup>15</sup> Despite School Portfolio being one of the primary pillars of School Change, and being articulated as “every school being supported on its own unique path to success,” schools appeared to have limited degrees of freedom over determining particular strategies to focus on for improvement. Members of the team and school leaders said that under the former SIP process, the district determined the growth targets, made most of the decisions about how resources were allocated, and often strongly influenced the strategies schools were expected to include in their SIPs. These strategies were often not communicated as formal requirements but “strongly encouraged” by those who evaluated principals and schools. Principals had essentially three primary levers—money, people, and time—and therefore faced substantial constraints. As the team discussed school improvement planning, I recognized the need for the group to consider the flexibility we provided to principals and schools, and why it was granted, based on our theory of action. Some of these flexibilities were easier for the group to influence and change. Others were much more deeply entrenched in the culture of the institution.

Moving from a command-and-control culture to thinking of the district as managing a portfolio of schools with distinctive profiles, giving schools more autonomy to achieve, and then both supporting and holding them accountable were things the central office supported inconsistently. The challenge in leading this team, and a challenge for the broader organization, was redefining norms to be more congruent with the beliefs and principles that underpinned the strategy and then figuring out how to engage people in behaviors that reflect these norms. This came out in a series of private conversations I had with the superintendent, members of the team, and school leaders about the non-negotiables in late February 2015. Despite having created a

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<sup>15</sup> Of its 49 schools, NHPS has 17 magnet schools. Given statutory requirements and the limiting language of the grants funding these schools, leaders at magnet schools tended to assert that they had more flexibility to determine particular improvement strategies than leaders at neighborhood schools. This sentiment was also echoed by a number of senior leaders and middle managers within the central office.



balanced progress report earlier in the year that outlined KPIs, the team kept being uncertain about the measures of accountability for schools. In addition, the team struggled to reach consensus about the extent to which schools would be mandated to select particular areas of focus for their SIPs (e.g., literacy). This was partly due to some members of the team (including me) not being sure whether we had identified the right set of indicators for academic progress on the balanced progress report and because of continued uncertainty about the state's required accountability framework for SY 2015-2016. I ultimately used my access to, and authority from, the superintendent to try to articulate the superintendent's perspective in meetings and conversations. For example, at a few team and department meetings, people said things like this: "If schools pick the wrong goals, we'll tell them what they should choose instead," and "When schools don't look at the right data or pick strategies that don't match the tests we will be giving students, tell them what to change." My response often took this form: "The superintendent believes schools need to determine which strategies and early evidence of impact are meaningful to their context to drive improvement. This should be about conversations between schools and central office rather than the central office telling schools they have chosen the 'wrong thing.'" In retrospect, I believe I should have invited the superintendent to attend one of our team meetings, or scheduled a meeting with our team and him, to talk explicitly about targets and non-negotiables and, more importantly, to continue emphasizing the shift toward the central office's supporting schools in their improvement efforts rather than just monitoring and playing an accountability function. The private conversations we were each having with the superintendent made it difficult for the team to reach consensus, given the wide range of perspectives on this particular point. I ended up using the guidance document to codify the balance we were attempting to strike between flexibility, collective responsibility, and accountability. While both the superintendent and team ultimately signed off on the guidance document and it circulated

widely through various channels, evidence is inconsistent as to how much the central office staff members altered their interaction with school leaders and teachers.

However, many of these individuals were more engaged in explicit conversations about school autonomy and flexibility. For instance, having ERS working with the district, and doing an analysis of the three levers of time, people, and money helped to create space to engage in a data-driven dialogue about the flexibilities we were giving schools. The P&L Review meeting we held in March 2015 on strategic school design in connection with SIP planning, and the March superintendent's meeting focused on the teachers' contract, created a "table" at which the central office and schools could collectively engage in a conversation about flexibilities. Setting up that discussion space also allowed the team (especially the executive director of instruction, the talent team, and me) to frame the conversation in a way that did not place blame on any one entity or put particular people or departments on the defensive. At the same time, it created a safe space to bring up sticky points, in which the superintendent voiced a desire for change, with a cross-section of stakeholders. In each of those meetings, having the superintendent frame the conversations and reinforce the idea that the district often creates self-imposed limitations on schools was helpful in challenging assumptions, surfacing competing commitments,<sup>16</sup> and starting conversations that have the potential to shift the relationship between the central office and schools.

### *THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE*

Andrés A. Alonso, former superintendent of Baltimore City Schools, has written, "Every action is a culture changing action. The most effective way of changing culture is through action."

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<sup>16</sup> At the P&L Review meeting on strategic school design, one of the curriculum supervisors echoed concern that the state was holding the district and, in essence, this supervisor accountable for a particular set of standardized test score results. If test scores dipped, he thought he would be held responsible and, therefore, it was necessary "to tell my teachers what to teach and when."

If through action, people begin to believe that something is different and then that difference is reinforced again and again and again, there is a change in culture” (Vanourek & Vanourek, 2012). If the rhetoric is about change, but people continue to experience the same thing, then the old culture continues to be reinforced.

I recognized early in my residency that modeling a new approach to teaming and improvement was going to be far more powerful for shifting culture, modifying mind-sets, introducing alternative schema, and changing behaviors than simply telling people how it should be done. As Elmore (2002) and others note, beliefs follow actions rather than actions following beliefs.<sup>17</sup> If the goal was to shift NHPS culture toward collective responsibility and ongoing improvement through embedding focused strategic planning and continuous cycles of improvement within schools and among schools and the central office, the central office team also needed to experience a similar process and begin to develop new cultural norms and ways of working together. As we outlined different steps of the SIP process (e.g., conducting a needs assessment, writing a theory of action), I attempted to take the team through the same steps so that team members were creating them at the same time they were experiencing them. The belief was that team members, and a broader set of central office staff, needed to experience what we were trying to encourage across more schools. My theory was that, by virtue of going through the same experience, team members and the broader central office staff would (1) see the power of strategic planning, (2) experience a dynamic learning process that could be a catalyst for the organizational conditions that enable successful response to demands for improvement, and (3) want to work to support similar conditions for schools (Forman, 2005). Having team members reflect on these experiences and tie them to what we wanted school teams to experience was critical for sustainability.

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<sup>17</sup> As Richard Elmore writes, “Only change in practice produces a genuine change in norms and values...grab people by their practice and their hearts and minds will follow.”

Before the December retreat, for example, some team members were particularly focused on the technical elements of this initiative: drafting the SIP template, determining when schools should complete the document, and deciding which elements of the prior SIP document should be retained. The team quite purposefully chose to step back during the December retreat and write a theory of action. This process of working together to develop a group theory of action and what was necessary to support school improvement helped members recognize the more strategic elements of this work. The conversation began to focus more on building a process and a subsequent set of systems to catalyze an ongoing cycle of improvement. Although members of the team later had trouble remembering the theory of action explicitly, the process we designed and initial support of the way in which we began to implement elements of the strategy evidenced a relative alignment with our group theory of action. Some writers in adult learning introduce the idea of andragogy as opposed to pedagogy (Knowles & Swanson, 2011). It is important for adults to know why they are learning what they are learning and that their previous expertise be honored. This theory argues that adult learners are more likely to resist learning when they think others are imposing information, ideas, or actions on them. My tactic was to engage the team in the learning and creation process as much as possible, staying away from giving answers. I tried to create a container in which people could interact with one another differently.

Upon reflection, I believe this approach and tactic are correct, but my success was limited. This is partly because I did not have the team play an integral role in building the tools and protocols we recommended that schools use to support this focused planning. Although the cross-functional team outlined the steps of the SIP process and used feedback to make modifications and adjustments, I did a lot of the “heavy lifting” in working with the consultant, executive director of instruction, and school leaders. I also wrote the guidance document; designed and led the workshops with central office staff and school teams; built out a SIP Toolkit using Google Drive, which housed tools and resources for leaders to use with their school teams;

and met with school leadership teams to support conducting a needs assessment. The workshops in particular continued to engage the central office and team in learning the work by doing the work. However, the process felt slow, and it continued to demonstrate how hard shifting practices and mind-sets can be. My experience also highlighted the challenge of implementing a new strategy that requires those executing the strategy to learn and adopt new capabilities. David Cohen et al., reflecting on the challenge of devising a consistent framework for instructional improvement, write that every success achieved often brings one face to face with new puzzles to solve (Cohen, Peurach, Glazer, Gates & Goldin, 2013). In other words, “The better you do, the worse it gets” (personal communication with David Cohen, 2015). Every step the team took to develop a more dynamic, collaborative process, focused on supporting schools through strategic improvement planning and data analysis, only illuminated more obstacles to making these organizational shifts and building the infrastructure necessary to support them. Ultimately, I am not convinced that the work and any accompanying new mind-sets are deeply embedded enough in the organization to be sustainable without strong nurturing and continuous reinforcement.

#### *EFFECTIVE TEAMS REQUIRE BALANCING INDIVIDUAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY*

Research from my RKA supports the idea that successful strategy implementation and continuous improvement are more likely to occur if driven by high-functioning teams. Curtis and City (2009) go so far as to say that every known school system making great progress in outcomes for students has high-functioning senior leadership teams. Through my facilitation and the assistance of an outside consultant, we were able to develop structures that allowed this cross-functional team to establish joint project goals, adopt a work plan, identify and complete concrete action steps, and make connections between the SIP process and other streams of work. However, I do not have data to suggest that we actually created a model of shared leadership that this team

could replicate to sustain these behaviors. In fact, when the group met to consider a different stream of work, with a different senior leader facilitating, the outcome and behaviors of the team were far different. People missed meetings, next steps were not established, and there was little internal accountability to one another or the work. The structures I attempted to put in place to support the team in “organizing to learn” did not appear to carry over when they faced a new task or problem. In the latter instance, even though it was the same group of individuals, the team’s purpose was not clear and roles and responsibilities were never clearly delineated.

To enact my theory of action more successfully, and in a way that made it more likely for this team to be function well when given a different task, I should have been more intentional about building in time for the group to reflect on its process. We did build in intentional time to listen to feedback from stakeholders and from one another, and I modeled making adjustments to process and product based on feedback, but the group itself never reflected on its own processes for operating with one another. It also appeared that the relational trust between some members of the team was relatively low, likely based on the dynamics of conflicting personalities or past interactions between team members. I missed an opportunity by not having the group start off by articulating norms and ways of working together that we should honor and to which we should hold ourselves accountable. The success of the initiative and the team seemed to depend on my personal organization and facilitation, and on work I did between formal meetings with team members to make sure they all had an adequate opportunity to share their concerns and have their questions answered.

During my early interviews with members of the senior leadership team, they seemed to want more structure and clearer communication. A number of the members of the leadership team, who also sat on the cross-functional team I led, expressed frustration at the general lack of organization and coordination. They noted that previous district meetings often started late, agendas were not distributed ahead of time or lacked sufficient detail, minutes were not kept,

meeting objectives were not clear, and meetings often felt like a waste of time. Knowing my own propensity for efficiency and creating processes (whether formal or informal) to move district priorities and work effectively, I created and reinforced a series of structures and norms (e.g., clear meeting agendas sent out ahead of each meeting, starting meetings on time, reviewing objectives at the start of each meeting, and reflecting with the team on objectives we had met at the end of each meeting) that, upon reflection, reinforced self-efficacy and the commitment to the project's success. However, those structures and norms did not become ingrained in the culture of the team, likely because they were never made explicit and collectively owned by the group. More than once in private conversations, team members said they respected my work ethic and the fact that I was able to move district priorities and create a plan that moved the team from ideas and questions to action. Because of this, they wanted to make sure I knew they supported the work of the team. This reaction highlights the need to invest in and be intentional about developing similar capabilities in others so that responsibility is shared and collectively owned.

Lastly, there is an important distinction between shared work product and shared priorities. This project sat at a significant intersection. Designing a process for schools to create an improvement plan was a shared work product the team was responsible for designing together. I ended up doing significant legwork to build the infrastructure we needed to execute the team's design. However, as a district strategy for school improvement, SIPs are a relatively blunt tool in isolation, without other structural changes or attention paid to the complex interplay of how schools are organized and interact with the central office and community (Bryk et al., 2010). This team came together to build a process for schools to write improvement plans, but the moments of greatest leverage for improving teaching and learning happened when I was able to connect the initiative across priority areas and we could focus on shared priorities rather than just a shared work stream. In these moments, particularly with the talent initiatives described earlier, we could

more directly address the mismatch between the traditional work, the capacity of the central office, and school performance demands (Honig, 2013).



## **CHAPTER 4: IMPLICATIONS FOR SELF, SITE, AND SECTOR**

My experience as a resident with NHPS provided a tremendous opportunity to reflect on my current strengths, limitations, and areas for growth as an education leader. I take with me from this experience significant and formative lessons. What follows in this chapter is a reflection on key implications for three different levels of the system: my own leadership and work, the unique NHPS site, and the broader education sector.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR SELF**

A key quality among successful leaders is an extraordinary tenacity in extracting something worthwhile from their experience and in seeking experiences rich in opportunities for growth.

—Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 12

As a resident, I took on a boundary-spanning role that reached across and beyond traditional borders—the central office, schools, and community—to build relationships, recognize interdependencies, and collaborate in order to manage the complex charge of supporting school improvement. In her work on boundary-spanning, Honig (2006) describes three challenges that central office boundary-spanners face in practice: managing role conflicts, resisting the gravitational pull of district command-and-control culture, and effecting change with limited authority. These three challenges, and several others, resonated throughout my experience and framed lessons I learned.

I initially chose NHPS as my residency site largely because of the complexity and ambitious nature of the reform efforts the superintendent and urban district were undertaking. I valued the superintendent's experience and personal focus on development and growth, and his commitment to keep pushing the organization to provide an equitable and meaningful education

for all students by improving teaching and learning. It was a dynamic organization in transition, but also one with deep roots, traditions, and history. I recognized that the assignment would likely hit the areas of growth I was focused on developing during my residency.

### *UNDERSTAND, MANAGE, AND FEEL COMFORTABLE LEADING CHANGE*

Systems thinking—understanding the interrelationships and connections that shape the behavior of systems—is within my comfort zone. I naturally see pieces of a puzzle, or the ways in which one element of a system influences another. I tend to approach problems and projects by trying to find ways to create coherence and alignment. I work well with analytical methods: collecting and analyzing data and information; diagnosing problems; and creating processes, protocols, and structures to move priorities and work toward a defined set of goals and outcomes. This comfort with analytic and process components can function as both a strength and a detriment. It helps me see the whole picture and be well-prepared, but it also can slow me down. It is not quite paralysis by analysis, but I can become too focused on trying to make each puzzle piece fit, aiming for perfection even though the pieces may never fit together as seamlessly as they should. Trying too hard to create a rational and organized path forward within a system that is by nature somewhat irrational and unorganized can stifle progress.

The philosopher Karl Popper distinguishes between cloud problems and clock problems. Clock problems are those with predictable resolutions; they are orderly and easily understood when one takes apart and breaks down the different components. Cloud problems, on the other hand, have less predictable solutions, are more amorphous, and are not easily taken apart and catalogued. Leading within complex urban school systems requires proficiency in handling cloud problems (Popper, 1966). I need to continue strengthening my ability to distill salient points from a complex bulk of experiences. My deliberate tendencies help me see and consider different dimensions to problems and possible solutions, and I think my work at NHPS significantly

“moved things.” However, I want to continue growing in my ability to look at complex situations, capture the amorphous trends, and skillfully lead others through the ambiguity that is inherent in organizational learning (Brooks, 2015). Writing this capstone was an exercise in this endeavor.

At NHPS, I was required to navigate a deep-seated bureaucracy with deep-seated legacies. I was familiar with, and felt very comfortable, building and leading organizations from the ground up. Many of my experiences in the education sector involved working in an entrepreneurial environment as a member of a team creating something new. I was a member of a new, innovative charter school in collaboration with the University of California, San Diego. I worked with Tennessee’s Achievement School District in its infancy, and I served as a board member for a national nonprofit organization focused on teacher leadership. In each of these instances, I had to be adept at navigating complex and problematic contexts and competing external commitments. However, the nature of the organization and work also provided space for design, innovation, and the creation of a culture, norms, and new traditions. My role at NHPS felt very different. It was not about being part of a team creating something from scratch. Rather, it was about trying to deepen, extend, and transform something that was already in place, sometimes rigidly so. Even the concept of “team” was often elusive.

Leading in this type of environment requires understanding, managing, and feeling comfortable with ambiguity. In the ambiguous and complex world of a large urban school district, I will never have all the information and time needed, and there will rarely be absolute certainty. Change is not a linear process involving simply writing a plan and following it through to completion in straightforward and predictable ways. As Dean Williams notes, “Change is a learning process and requires leadership that can prod people to confront and deal with the problematic realities of why the system is not performing up to its potential and what, where, and how it can be changed” (Williams, p. 42). It involves appreciating the system dynamics and knowing when and how to pull the right levers at the right time to get people’s attention, support,

and engagement. This is especially applicable to the environment in which most superintendents and district leaders are asked to lead, one that is highly politicized and immersed in complex social and economic dynamics. Leaders “need to understand the functions that leadership and authority serve in holding a multi-party system together, in maintaining its focus, drive, and resilience, and in generating adaptive change through the confrontation of differences (Williams, p. 49).

As the residency progressed, I became much more confident gathering available information, analyzing it, making a decision, and acting upon it. Sometimes it involved collaboration with a team, sometimes it involved making a decision and bringing along certain members of the team afterward. Sometimes it worked; sometimes it had to be fine-tuned. One of the lingering effects of ambiguity that I noticed was the discomfort many colleagues exhibited when we wrestled with questions that had no immediate answers. Seasoned employees were quick to jump to concrete solutions and return to old ways of doing things. The superintendent often said, “The answer is in the room,” but that implies a room of individuals who are not deterred by ambiguity and are willing to recognize that the way questions were answered in the past may not be the best way to answer them in the future. I need to pay more attention to the levers available to catalyze changes in work practices and capacity, and encourage different approaches to problem solving that are necessary for meaningful improvement. Prior to the Ed.L.D. program, I often relied on a more balanced toolkit of leadership levers—persuasion, collaboration, and compulsion (through formal authority or borrowing another’s authority) —to impact and influence policy and practice. Having little formal authority in the role of resident, I relied on a less robust set of levers, often choosing to use persuasion and collaboration to influence behaviors and build common understanding.

The first few months of the residency provided an interesting array of experiences as I encountered some unpredictable and volatile behaviors during my early efforts to build

relationships, trust, and legitimacy, and to engage in the delicate dance of inquiry and advocacy. I believe deeply in being a learner in this work and continuing to model the practice of learning. I also know it is important to advocate and, at times, make difficult but necessary decisions without the full consensus of a team or set of stakeholders. In early January 2015, the superintendent commented, “Continue to try and use your hammer.” This was particularly challenging given the lack of clarity about where I fit in the organizational structure and the extent to which I could borrow authority from the superintendent to exercise that hammer when particular resistance and entrenched behaviors arose. However, in retrospect, I may have had more space to use steel than I realized.

Leadership within the context of an urban school district requires being able to generate thought and movement, participation and engagement, focus and purpose, and a problem-solving capacity that elicits active participation and commitment by members and factions within the system. Dean Williams talks about how change creates heat that can often drive people, factions, interest groups, and stakeholders to act in defensive and subversive ways. However, heat generated by change also produces the energy necessary to ignite the creative tensions needed to explore the deeper elements of entrenched problems (Williams, p. 42). I want to pay more attention to the ways in which I am able to regulate the “oven temperature” necessary for successful change management. I come to leadership with a growth mind-set, believing deeply in the potential of students and adults to grow and learn, and with an orientation toward the power of collaboration to build shared understanding, momentum, and the capacity necessary to sustain and address systemic challenges in our public education system.

NHPS is led by a superintendent whose theory of action is “engagement” and who believes “the answer is in the room.” It became a leadership challenge to create the conditions necessary to elicit answers in the room, balancing the time this takes with the urgency of the work. I want to pay more attention as a leader to diagnosing the level of distress people and the

system can tolerate as the organization undergoes periods of disorientation, and be attuned to those moments where I can and should lead more boldly. Rarely as a system-level leader will I have time to gather all the information, engage everyone, and adequately build capacity and collective comfort about the change that is happening. Affecting students and organizations positively requires striking a balance: helping the room learn together and generate answers and at the same time moving expeditiously and sometimes without consensus.

To face the challenges of NHPS and the pace of change required to maintain legitimacy and dramatically impact teaching and learning, one must balance many key levers. During the ten months of residency I learned that any one lever is insufficient to cause dramatic and meaningful organizational change, not just tinker around the edges. As I lead within increasingly complex systems, I will continue to focus on leveraging the full parameters of my position, demonstrating leadership that is both velvet and steel.

#### *FOCUS FIRST ON CHANGING BEHAVIORS AND EMPOWERING OTHERS*

Based on the research I reviewed and on my experience, it was clear that behaviors often change before beliefs. I found that effective leadership begins with a focus on changing behaviors, rather than on changing assumptive norms and opinions. I spent some initial energy, especially with certain team members, discussing emerging theories about learning and improvement. However, real change began only when I led a process that required a change in behavior. For instance, the teaming process presented a new way of solving problems and managing conflicts, one that was different than conventional methods used in the past. When the new behavior worked, it helped change some people's foundational beliefs in the system.

I want to continue to focus on sharing the work product and taking advantage of shared priorities. During the residency, I often felt like I was the designer, manufacturer, mechanic, and driver of the car. I knew the work would get done and done well if I did it, but I was not always developing the capacity in other team members to design, lead, feel ownership, and remain

responsible. Part of this inability to delegate effectively was because the tenure of the residency was relatively short for the challenging task of launching this initiative, shifting culture, and developing capabilities. It felt like a high mountain to climb in a very limited amount of time. On the other hand, I had more success when I worked across boundaries—talent, resource allocation, and so on—with other units that shared our priorities. Historically, distributing leadership within a team has not been this challenging for me, but the role of resident brought with it a more nebulous scope of influence and authority. I tend to fill voids. If there is a gap in planning or execution, I figure out a way to identify the issue, develop a strategy, elicit support within or across borders, and move the work forward. I view this as a personal strength, but must remain cognizant and take advantage of opportunities to empower others on my team by creating the same momentum and connections I found with others who had shared priorities.

If it is a capacity issue, I need to spend more time supporting and developing that capacity in others. It is important to have talented and dedicated people. If it is a clarity issue, I need to clarify. It is important to have those talented and dedicated people share a clearly articulated vision and priority with you. Ultimately, I tend to take on a lot, and so I need to be more willing to bring others into the room to solve problems in a truly collaborative and well-informed manner. That is the essence of leadership; it's what differentiates leading people from managing work. “When leaders empower, rather than control; when they ask the right questions, rather than provide the right answers; and when they focus on flexibility, rather than insight on adherence, they move to a higher form of execution” (Edmondson, 2012).

### *A FINAL THOUGHT*

Finally, throughout this process, I also worried more than I probably should. A genuine concern about an educational institution and the future of its students is what makes a great educator and leader. However, I also realize the importance of prioritizing oneself in the work as well. With an inclination to put the needs of others before my own, particularly the needs of

students, I can feel burned-out and drained more often than I would like, which ultimately makes me less effective as a leader. After this residency, I appreciate even more the importance of striking a healthy work-life balance if the job is to be personally sustainable and if I am to continue bringing my best self to the work.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SITE

Once a district has a viable strategy, it faces two central capacity building challenges. The first is delivering excellence when the scale is vast...the second is speed. The capacity of its people must be built at an accelerating pace over time to keep up with the momentum and expectations created by early wins.

- Leading for Equity (p. 73)

With School Change 2.0, Superintendent Harries is calling for a paradigm shift in how students are educated, how NHPS organizes its work, and how the system takes collective responsibility for student success. At the school level, it is a move toward creating the conditions necessary to support deeper and more personalized learning experiences for students. At the district level, it is a shift away from the central office playing primarily a compliance and monitoring role, and toward playing a more supportive and responsive role. It involves developing a coherent strategy and organizing resources across the district to support a system of great schools, rather than just a great school system. It seeks to transition members of the central office from being deliverers of information to being facilitators of adult and student learning.

Following are steps NHPS may consider taking to deepen and extend School Change 2.0, particularly focusing on a strategy that supports a shift toward a culture of continuous improvement and collective responsibility. Such a shift may threaten to disrupt and destabilize much of what makes people feel competent and confident in their current positions. Making such a change requires a substantial and strategic commitment to help adults in the system learn how and why to do something new, while leveraging the power of leadership constructively to create the necessary urgency for change.



### *ANCHOR THE WORK IN AN EXPLICIT THEORY OF ACTION*

One of the tensions that confronted the team as it built out the strategy for school improvement planning and implementation was a sense that the steps we identified as important for creating a culture of collaborative inquiry at the school level—particularly taking time to step back, analyze root causes, and articulate a theory of action for improvement—were not mirrored at the district level. The School Change 2.0 document and P&L Review structure outline a number of key priority areas and initiatives for the district to focus its energy and resources. The stated goals, core values, and identified priorities of School Change 2.0 focus on increasing school capacity to improve and enabling educators to engage in disciplined innovation by developing and testing strategies to increase student outcomes. However, the theory of action for the district to do this is elusive, and an adoptive philosophy to support and hold the schools and central office accountable in this endeavor remains nebulous. The district and senior leadership team will be well served by crystallizing an explicit theory of action that represents the district’s collective belief about the causal relationships between certain actions and desired outcomes (Childress et al., 2007). This theory of action should be returned to often, and explicitly tested through a process of inquiry at the district level that mirrors what schools are encouraged to be doing with their own improvement plans at the school level.

Engaging in the difficult conversations necessary to create a theory of action will give the district an important focusing mechanism to narrow the range of strategies, initiatives, and activities to those that have the highest likelihood of increasing achievement levels. Tough conversations must occur, particularly among the executive leadership team, and resistance to change must be managed. Facilitating a conversation among team members to articulate a clear theory of action about how to strengthen the instructional core and support the improvement of schools creates a container, or holding environment. This container will raise the temperature, so

that the district and its senior leaders surface assumptions that individuals and departments have, test some of that reasoning, and make intentions and expectations more apparent.

*BUILD SYSTEM CAPACITY: INVEST IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF EFFECTIVE PEOPLE AND TEAMS*

A deep investment in the effectiveness of people and teams is required to meet the goals of School Change 2.0 and to foster a culture of ongoing improvement and learning. District improvement requires managing an organized system of elements in dynamic interaction with one another. One of those elements is the incentive structures that motivate people's actions. There is an asymmetry of power in urban school systems and people tend to take their cues from the top. NHPS should continue to strengthen the ways in which its senior leadership team and district committees model the behaviors of highly effective leaders and teams. Structures for collaboration already exist, such as joint committees, working groups, and department meetings. Within these structures, however, the opportunity for authentic collaboration that facilitates learning is new and uncomfortable to many, given the organization's traditional command-and-control tendencies.

As noted in the RKA, to support highly effective teaming, particularly within an organization with shifting expectations for collaboration and problem-solving, it is important that the team's purpose be clear, its work be challenging and consequential, and its members be accountable for process and outcomes. It often felt that learning and developmental opportunities at the individual and collective levels were lost. To build capacity for continuous learning and for realizing ongoing performance improvements, organizations need a rigorous structure for helping individuals and teams (1) establish learning and outcome goals, (2) reimagine their own responsibilities as leaders of service teams charged with contributing to the improvement of schools and instruction, and (3) hold teams and their members accountable for engaging in evidence-based improvement processes (Honig, 2013, p. 7). This includes diagnosing teams and

individuals who are not doing work that supports progress, and implementing appropriate measures to address such behavior. NHPS has a set of decisions to make about culture change. A suggested approach would establish explicit behavioral expectations (e.g., accept and adhere to the cultural expectations codified in the district's core values rather than pursue personal agendas that perpetuate system values and norms that work in opposition to organizational learning) that are matched with specific supports. This option requires strong leadership and the ability to create psychological safety, sets of support, and high levels of internal accountability.

The executive team's two-day retreats in fall 2014 focused on sustainable teaming, but many of the norms and commitments the team made dissipated over time. Greater support is needed to help teams of senior-level and mid-level leaders model and practice effective teaming, act in accordance with the organization's core values, and adopt a stance of collective responsibility. Initially, NHPS may want to invest in bringing in outside support to work with team leaders and/or train senior leaders in effective teaming. While financially unsustainable in the long run, this external coaching can create an initial model to train more people within the central office on the building blocks of effective teaming. This is especially important given that the NHPS central office is relatively small compared to other similarly situated school districts. Staff time and talent is at a premium and must be used effectively and efficiently.

In addition, a more intentional use of structured meeting protocols initially will allow senior-level teams to delve more deeply into important issues, shifting the ways in which members interact with one another. People need to experience what it is they are trying to create, and there needs to be leadership in place to manage and lead members of the group through this process. While ambiguity and fluidity of roles and responsibilities can be beneficial in particular contexts, in the context of NHPS, where an important and ambitious cultural shift is taking place, clarity of responsibilities and expected outcomes will help people grow through this transition.

NHPS can take a few steps to reinforce greater role clarity while trying to avoid the calcification common in organizations. Leaders should minimize blame and focus on improvement, but be clear about what the desired outcomes are for particular people in particular roles. Clearly defined outcomes and sets of responsibilities for individual roles increase one's sense of self-efficacy and make feedback conversations focused on growth and development more targeted and helpful. The district's internal performance management systems, if strengthened to embed a more robust commitment to personal and collective development, can be effective tools to facilitate stronger feedback loops and development conversations.

Lastly, district success depends on having talented and dedicated people around you who are willing to buy into a shared vision. Although the task may be emotionally and politically challenging, a leader must address situations where someone is in the wrong position. This becomes even more complicated, especially for a relatively new leader, when the individual in question has a long history with or strong allies within the organization. Context matters, and it was difficult for me to determine the relative cost and benefit of reassigning certain members or making other personnel changes. This issue cannot be ignored, however, and conscious decisions should be made to assemble and support an effective cross-functional leadership team. The district would be best served by making strategic hires as new people enter the senior level of the organization and by carefully considering the scope of responsibilities delegated to particular roles.

#### *ADOPT A FRAMEWORK FOR IMPROVEMENT*

At the beginning of this school year, the district adopted a shared responsibility framework that included the Plan-Act-Assess framework. This framework for improvement was a core foundational element in the school improvement planning process that we created. Rooted in the idea of a cycle of collaborative inquiry, improvement cycles equip teachers and schools with

data to make instructional decisions and clarify the process by which teachers and school leaders can drive meaningful improvements in teaching and learning.

The school improvement planning process demonstrated that NHPS has a strong tradition of schools writing plans, listing goals, and identifying desired outcomes and sets of action steps. However, it needs to build capacity for actively monitoring the extent to which the efforts adopted by the schools and district actually result in improvements. This requires building evidence-based practices by teams of educators to move a plan from ideas on paper to actions that change and improve teaching and learning. A framework for improvement, with a prioritized implementation, will provide the district and schools with a structure and method for testing improvement ideas and increase the likelihood of engaging teams of educators in the success of improvement efforts.

Three key questions can guide this Plan-Act-Assess framework for improvement: What are we trying to accomplish? How will we know if a change is an improvement? What changes can we make that will result in improvement?<sup>18</sup> The answers to these questions should derive, in part, from the district and each school's improvement plan. These questions and the improvement framework provide a clear path forward and, when answered through a careful Plan-Act-Assess cycle, help foster thoughtful planning, testing, changes, and decision-making for improvements.

Adopting a disciplined inquiry and improvement framework, making the investment to train people in that inquiry approach, and holding teams accountable to engage in evidence-based improvement processes will help teams of teachers, school-based leaders, and central office staff better diagnose the learning needs of students and support the design of instructional responses

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<sup>18</sup> These questions are adapted from the model for improvement popularized by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, which was established by the Associates for Process Improvement. It embeds the Plan-Do-Study-Act model and applies disciplined improvement methodology based on the three key questions.

and systems to meet those needs. Given that the SIP framework is aligned with inquiry-driven improvement efforts, NHPS should create an internal network of coaches who have the capacity to lead schools in the identified inquiry cycle. Directors of instruction and curriculum supervisors are considered the "go-to" people in the district to find support for instructional practice and school improvement efforts. The ability to perform this role varies among these individuals. To support teachers and site leaders effectively, members of the central office need to understand deeply the inquiry cycle schools are implementing and provide relevant on-the-ground training. NHPS should invest in intensive and ongoing workshops with current staff, consider bringing in an outside provider to build some initial capacity at the school and district levels, and think carefully about redefining the roles and responsibilities of particular central office positions, as mentioned previously.

The district may also want to consider establishing more formal networks of schools, in which educators drive the improvement process and act as hubs for expert knowledge and practice. These could potentially be organized around a magnet theme, similar problems of practice, or instructional models adopted. The current personalized learning collaborative supported through the League of Innovative Schools involving NHPS high schools is an early example of such a network. The district should carefully consider the central office staff assigned to support these schools and the knowledge management infrastructure established at the district level to capture knowledge gleaned from these networks.

Finally, for sustained improvement to occur and schools to receive the personalized supports necessary to promote their own individual paths to success, the district should consider developing a more robust framework for tiered school supports. Like the process in Response to Intervention, the district should outline different levels of supports and intervention based on academic and school quality indicators that are drawn from the balanced progress report and the supports identified in a school's improvement plan. Anchoring the work in a district theory of

action for improvement, NHPS can consider with more specificity how it will identify and deliver the sets of tiered supports to schools based on individual school needs.

### *EMBRACE THE URGENCY OF THE WORK, CULTIVATE JOY, AND CELEBRATE*

NHPS continues to succeed and show progress despite many challenges and areas for growth. It has made significant progress in turnaround schools in the first five years of School Change. There is a 17% increase in graduation rates since 2009, and a number of schools that were failing are now showing important gains. There is a strong, collaborative relationship between labor and management that is unlike that of many other urban districts. District personnel are collaborating on work in new ways, and connective tissue is being created, as evidenced by the results shared in this capstone. One final implication for site is to realize the tremendous positive impact that recognition and celebration of this progress will have on the health of an organization. NHPS should continue to honor openly the success of its students and the commitment and dedication of its educators in the central office and at the schools.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR SECTOR

A recent surge of literature and research acknowledges the important role that central offices play in helping schools improve their performance and student achievement. This capstone leveraged an opportunity to study such efforts within the context of an urban school district, exploring how central office leadership can work together, and with schools, to rethink the ways in which districts support schools in realizing improvement goals.

In *Improvement by Design*, Cohen et al. (2013) write, “Successes beget challenges” (p. 173). This is the paradoxical result that can occur in urban school districts: the better the system addresses one set of weaknesses and problems, the more difficult the task of improvement

becomes. The team I led, as well as other teams that developed as a result of the P&L Review structure, demonstrate that things are shifting at NHPS. There is a deepening and extending of elements necessary for coherence and effective teaming. But building the school improvement plan highlighted new puzzles that need to be solved. Each new puzzle requires more coordination, leadership, resources, and time. The lessons learned at NHPS, and especially through this strategic project, have implications for the sector about the complexities of planning and improvement processes, the challenge of shifting organizational culture, and the need for districts and schools to balance external demands while operating within unstable budgetary and political environments. As a sector, we must learn to embrace the urgency of these new challenges, not as distractions from convention, but as tremendous opportunities for improvement, innovation, and success.

#### *SYSTEMIC LEARNING: BUILDING SYSTEMS AND SHAPING CULTURE*

Strategy comes to life in how it is executed. As Superintendent Harries stated during testimony in 2009 that described the small school work he led in New York City, “In my experience, the quality of ideas is rarely the key differentiating factor between good schools and failing schools – rather, it is the quality and consistency of execution” (Harries, 2009). What the reform and improvement efforts at NHPS highlight is the importance of designing strategies that are comprehensive and coherent yet also nimble and responsive. While this capstone does not capture in full detail the execution of the school improvement planning process, the subsequent phases of implementation should reinforce the importance of districts and their leadership to reassess constantly and make the work less about the original template and more about adjusting as needed to reach the desired outcomes. As noted in the Implications for Site section, it is important that an improvement framework be adopted and its implementation be supported with fidelity.



In their study of school improvement efforts in Chicago Public Schools, Tony Bryk et al. (2010) use the analogy of baking a cake to describe successful improvement efforts. They note that organizational subsystems of a school stand in dynamic interaction with one another and, thus, improvement entails orchestrating a set of mutually reinforcing activities over time (Bryk et al., 2010). When a core ingredient is missing, "it is just not a cake." Similarly, NHPS's recipe for success contained five key pillars for school change and school improvement: Academics, Talent, Portfolio of Schools, Wraparound and Community Partnerships, and Strategic Infrastructure. Should there be material weakness in any of these "ingredients," school improvement becomes difficult, if not impossible, to execute. Thus, as we worked to build an improvement planning process and culture of inquiry, two things became more clear: (1) the importance of having an overall coherence of improvement efforts and (2) the better the team became at responding to new problems and challenges, the more comprehensive the work became and the more obvious the capacity gaps to support and improve schools became.

Districts must choose carefully how to mix and match initiatives to create the conditions for systemic change and support of school improvement. They must invest in capacity-building tools that address structures and resources, as well as culture, competencies, and motivation. These can and should include:

- **Instituting formal training** to increase strategy-building and leadership capacity;
- **Establishing processes for regular feedback loops**, including utilization of district self-assessments and performance management systems rooted in development and evaluation;
- **Modeling new behaviors and setting expectations** for shifts in the culture through problem-solving processes that balance internal accountability with psychological safety, support open and honest team dialogue, promote reflection, and reward adjustments made for improvement;

- **Distributing and sharing responsibility** and involving a cross-section of stakeholders in the development of strategy, implementation, and execution of strategy while also holding teams and individuals accountable; and
- **Codifying lessons learned** through tools like guidance documents that outline strategies and provide scaffolds to schools and the central office staff.

### *BUILD INFRASTRUCTURE TO DEEPEN AND EXTEND COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS*

One thing clarified by this strategic project is the necessity of investing in educational infrastructure—planning tools and protocols, instructional and leadership development systems, common frameworks, training, and coordinated assessments—and working closely in collaborative and sustained ways with schools to plan and execute improvement strategies. An investment must be made in enhancing the working relationship between district leadership and schools. Improvement requires deepening and improving the collaborative systems and structures in place to promote cross-pollination of promising practice. These include structured school visits and observations, shared professional learning communities and peer-to-peer networks, and cohort-based structures for those piloting new and innovative school models. Each time we brought schools leaders together with the central office, learning happened. Both at the site and sector levels, we must invest more in developing and supporting models of deliberate collaboration and exchanges of ideas that build capacity and break down barriers.

## CONCLUSION

Education is the great equalizer. It has the ability to empower students and end cycles of poverty. But it takes enlightened, courageous leaders who believe in each student's potential and are willing to support all aspects of that student's education. It also takes leaders who have the courage to take innovative, progressive, and bold steps to close the opportunity gap.

Superintendent Harries and my colleagues at NHPS provided a tremendous opportunity for me to work closely with central office leaders, principals, teachers, students, parents, community members, politicians, union officials, and other stakeholders interested in bringing success to a dynamic and rising urban public school district.

My efforts to develop, implement, and manage what I hope will be a sustainable, multifaceted approach to improve the ways in which a central office can best support school improvement and student growth comprise one chapter, albeit a very long chapter, in the story of my New Haven experience. This capstone captures that portion of the work I did, and the lessons I learned, on the front lines of urban education. It is a sincere examination of how a cross-functional senior leadership team collaborated to design a district-wide school improvement planning process to improve the quality of teaching and learning for all students in New Haven.

Teaming and strategic improvement planning are definite drivers to help an organization achieve its goals. The central offices of urban school districts need to establish and support internal systems and processes that create a culture of change, innovation, and risk-taking to enable continuous improvement. Such a transformation will strengthen performance and help all students realize important and ambitious learning goals.

The process is not easy. It requires a shift in culture from one that focuses on business and compliance functions to one oriented toward supporting schools and improving teaching and learning. Payne (2008) paints a pretty bleak picture: "[t]he school system has evolved into a

pathological bureaucracy, an organization whose traditions, structures, and operations subvert the organizational mission" (p. 123) and where "[t]he various support offices get in one another's way" (p. 128). This pathology is not universal, but to engage in the shifting process, district leaders must continue to explore new ways of working together and working with schools. In particular, the central office must shift from organizing to execute to organizing to learn. This process has both possibilities and limitations, and my capstone provides several practical recommendations for making this transition.

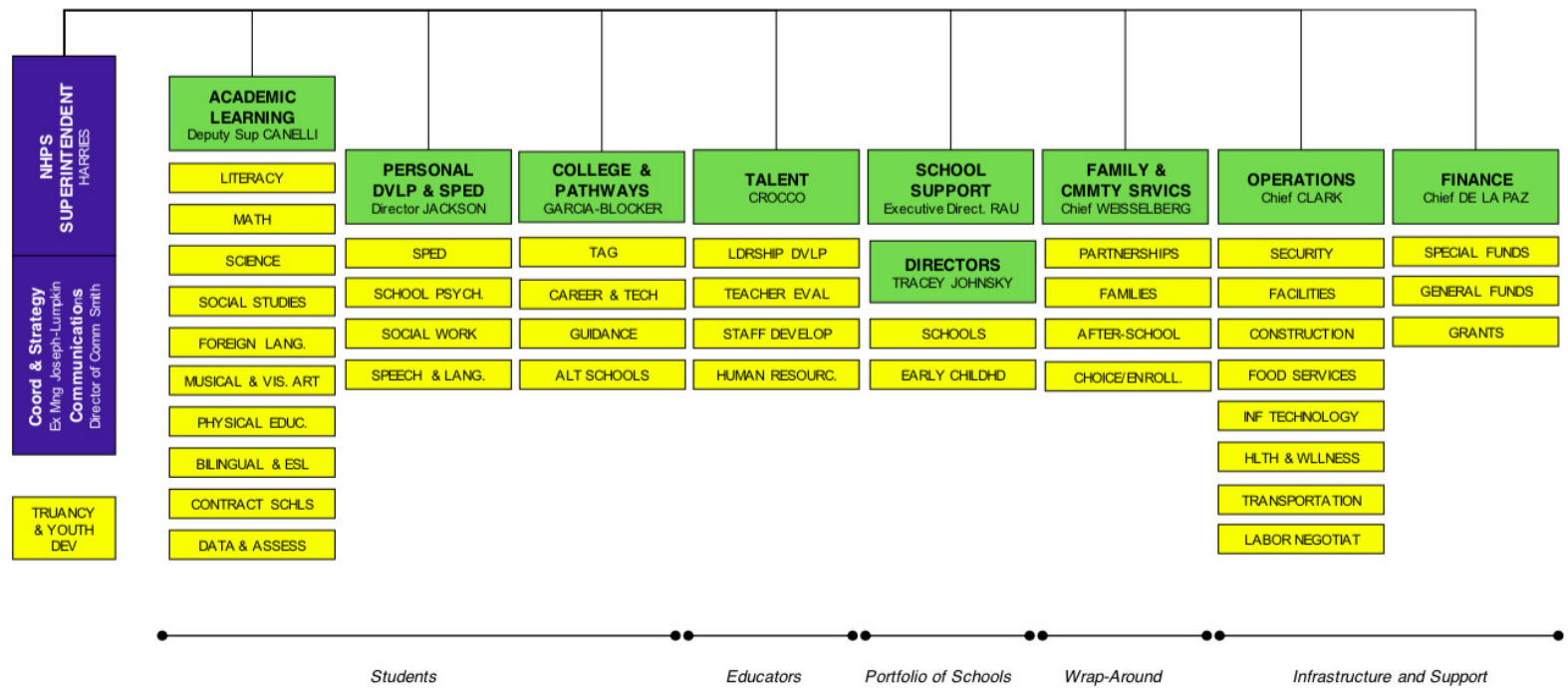
During the course of my residency, NHPS was able to integrate some, but not all, key principles of effective strategic planning and execution. As an educator, however, I believe that all lessons are helpful. I acknowledge the complexity of the challenge. Shifting the culture of NHPS, which operates within an uncertain and unsettled political and social environment, is formidable but not impossible. Adopting strategies that include feedback loops, cycles of inquiry, and promoting relational trust will serve the district well in the future.

Three years ago, I concluded my application to the Ed.L.D. program at Harvard with a story about a student named Alejandro. A member of my advisory class for 7 years, Alejandro was the first in his family to graduate from high school. During his sophomore year, his parents lost their home and were forced to move into a homeless shelter. On the eve of graduation from high school and with a full academic scholarship to college, Alejandro handed me a note, which said, "I have appreciated all you have done for me. You helped me survive my classes, hundreds of assignments, and many stressful days. You are always there encouraging me to succeed and do better. You lift me up when I am down. You are my guardian angel." Today, Alejandro is in his second year as an elementary school teacher, working with students who face the same challenges he did as a student. I believe in the transformative power of public education because of students like Alejandro.

Alejandro's story shows why we must keep pushing to continue improving all aspects of our education system. Our school districts and schools, led by progressive and innovative educators and leaders, must continue to exercise the transcendent power of a true commitment to provide educational equity to all our students. I hope the lessons of NHPS will help that cause.

# Appendix A: New Haven Public Schools Organizational Chart

2013-14 New Haven Public Schools – LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE – December 2013



## Appendix B: Performance & Learning Review Framework

### Performance & Learning Reviews

#### *Performance & Learning Reviews*

The purpose of Performance Learning Reviews is to ensure a periodic and cross-organizational focus on data and initiatives within major priority areas of School Change, so as to strengthen coordination, alignment, and effectiveness. The overarching goal is to support the district's student learning goals, by working to deliver a portfolio of great schools that empower students to achieve success in college, career and life through purposeful, supportive and meaningful learning experiences.

#### *Format of Performance & Learning Reviews*

Weekly meetings focusing on one of 6 priority organizational learning areas, with the following standing agenda structure:

- I. Deep Dive on a Focus Initiative
- II. Review of Current Metrics
- III. Quick Status Review of Initiatives

#### *Performance & Learning Review Participants*

- Open to all Executive Team members
- Cabinet Level and key project staff from across the organization
- Targeted principals, teachers, and other community stakeholders

#### *Roles and Responsibilities*

- **Coordinator:** Coordinators develop the agenda and facilitate Performance Learning Reviews; ensure appropriate cross-functional participation both in Performance Learning Reviews and in working groups.
- **Project Manager:** Project Manager's assist in coordinating cross-functional support of initiatives, including creation of agenda, materials, and synthesis of key takeaways.
- **Data Liaison:** Data Liaison's work with Coordinators, Project Managers and work groups to help identify, provide, and analyze relevant data. They provide support, where needed, with research and program evaluation.

## Appendix B: Performance & Learning Review Framework

<i>Priority Areas:</i>	<i>Current Focus Initiatives (Working Committees)</i>	<i>How we measure progress DRAFT</i>
<b>1. Academic Learning Systems</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. PreK-1 Literacy Practice (including infant toddler connections)</li> <li>b. Middle School (6-8) to High School alignment</li> <li>c. High School to College/Career alignment</li> <li>d. Personalized Learning initiative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Academic measures from Key Performance Indicators, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Early reading proficiency</li> <li>o Quarterly grades</li> <li>o Students meeting college ready benchmarks</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Student Success Plan completion</li> </ul>
<b>2. Social Emotional and Physical Learning Systems</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Purposeful School Level Systems (SSST, Wellness, Attendance, YouthStat, etc.)</li> <li>b. Social Emotional Learning Standards and Systems, including curriculum connections, PD, and tracking</li> <li>c. Student engagement efforts (i.e. student leadership skills, self-advocacy, cultural competence)</li> <li>d. Restorative and Recuperative Practices: Student re-engagement (YouthStat and attendance/truancy) and school design (Alternative Schools, Restorative Justice Discipline, and Homebound redesign)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Whole Child indicators from Key Performance Indicators (Student attendance, suspensions, and expulsion)</li> <li>- Quarterly “early warning indicators” (attendance, behavior, course performance); over-age and under-credited students</li> <li>- Student engagement indicators (e.g. student satisfaction survey)</li> </ul>
<b>3. Educators/Talent</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Coherent and embedded professional learning, including strengthening ties between evaluation and development</li> <li>b. Tightened structure of Educator Career Lattice, including roles, competencies, accountability for expanded influence</li> <li>c. Teacher Attendance Improvement</li> <li>d. Recruitment systems; increasing responsiveness, improving timing, and targeting minorities</li> <li>e. Non-certified staff, professional support and accountability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teacher, Principal, and other educator’s satisfaction indicators (e.g. teacher satisfaction from survey, central office survey results, etc.)</li> <li>- Evaluation rating distribution and growth</li> <li>- Teacher attendance rates</li> </ul>



## Appendix B: Performance & Learning Review Framework

<i>Priority Areas:</i>	<i>Current Focus Initiatives (Working Committees)</i>	<i>How we measure progress DRAFT</i>
<b>4. School Portfolio Supports</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>a.</i> School Performance: Shared Responsibility and Support Framework (e.g. re-examine KPI's, tiering, equity, peer indexing, etc.)</li> <li><i>b.</i> School Feedback Systems (i.e. School reviews, instructional rounds)</li> <li><i>c.</i> School Improvement Plans: strengthening system, supports, and processes</li> <li><i>d.</i> Campus Planning: Hillhouse Campus and Wilbur Cross High School</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Key Performance Indicators at school level</li> <li>- Quarterly "early warning indicators" (attendance, behavior, course performance)</li> <li>- Use and implementation of School Improvement Plans</li> <li>- School Climate Survey</li> <li>- School Review Feedback</li> </ul>
<b>5. Community and Parent Partnerships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>a.</i> Strategic mapping of partnerships and responsibilities, district and school level</li> <li><i>b.</i> Expanded Mentorship and afterschool systems</li> <li><i>c.</i> Data warehouse and asset mapping</li> <li><i>d.</i> Parent Engagement</li> <li><i>e.</i> Community Schools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mentorship participants</li> <li>- Parent participation</li> <li>- Community partnerships</li> <li>- Participation in after school partnership programs</li> </ul>
<b>6. Strategic Infrastructure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>a.</i> FY 16 Budgeting</li> <li><i>b.</i> NHPS Financial Tracking and Strategic Budgeting</li> <li><i>c.</i> Revised School construction and Capital Plan</li> <li><i>d.</i> IT strategy and investments with operation and finance goals</li> <li><i>e.</i> Enrollment projections and planning, with classroom planning</li> <li><i>f.</i> Redistricting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Financial projections, this year and next</li> <li>- Service delivery measures (i.e. work orders filled and outstanding)</li> </ul>

## Appendix C: Performance & Learning Review Calendar of Meetings

### Performance & Learning Reviews: Cycle of Meetings 2014-2015 School Year

Date: Weekly – Thursday mornings

Time: 9:00 – 11:00 am

Location: 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor Board Room

*If you are interested in attending a Performance & Learning Review, please send an RSVP to the Coordinator and/or Project Manager for each priority area. This will help us ensure that there are enough seats and materials for each attendee.*

Academic Learning Systems	School Portfolio Supports	Talent	Strategic Infrastructure Systems	Community Partnerships	Social Emotional and Physical Learning Systems
<b>Coordinators and Project Managers:</b>  Imma Canelli Suzanne Lyons	<b>Coordinators and Project Managers:</b>  Damaris Rau Kelly Kovacic	<b>Coordinators and Project Managers:</b>  Mike Crocco Justin Boucher	<b>Coordinators and Project Managers:</b>  Will Clark Victor De La Paz Sid Chowdri	<b>Coordinators and Project Managers:</b>  Adrianna Joseph	<b>Coordinators and Project Managers:</b>  Typhanie Jackson Malcolm Welfare Johanna Samberg-Champion
September 25, 2014	October 2, 2014 *	October 9, 2014	October 30, 2014	October 16, 2014	November 6, 2014
November 13, 2014	November 19, 2014 <sup>††</sup>	December 3, 2014 <sup>†§</sup>	December 4, 2014	December 11, 2014	December 18, 2014
January 8, 2015	January 22, 2015	January 15, 2015	January 29, 2014	February 5, 2015	February 12, 2015
March 19, 2015	March 12, 2015	April 2, 2015	March 26, 2015		April 9, 2015
April 23, 2015	April 30, 2015	May 7, 2015	May 14, 2015	May 21, 2015	May 28, 2015
		June 4, 2015			

\* This meeting will take place in Conference Room 5A

† Denotes a change in day from the regular scheduled Thursday PL meeting

‡ This meeting is scheduled for a Tuesday

§ This meeting is scheduled from 2:30 – 4:30 pm

# Appendix D: New Haven Public Schools Balanced Progress Report

## New Haven Public Schools Cooperative Arts HS - 936411 High School Report

2013-14 Oct 1 Enrollment				635
	% Black	% Latino	% White	% Other
Male	15.9%	8.7%	7.6%	1.1%
Female	34.2%	16.1%	14.6%	1.6%

Indicator	Performance Measure	Actual				
		10-11	11-12	12-13	13-14	graphic
HS Graduation - 4-year	4-Year Cohort Graduation Rate	83.5%	90.4%	89.6%	92.7%	
HS Graduation - 5-year	5 Year Cohort Graduation Rate		93.3%			
College Enrollment	Percent graduates enrolling in college one-year post-graduation (any semester)	(GY 2009) 70.2%	(GY 2010) 64%	(GY 2011) 67.7%	(GY 2012) 72.2%	
College Persistence	Percent first year college enrollees with continued enrollment in second year (any semester)	(GY 2009) 78%	(GY 2010) 76.4%	(GY 2011) 76.5%	(GY 2012) 78.5%	
College Success	Percent graduates enrolled in college second year post-graduation (any semester)	(GY 2009) 54.8%	(GY 2010) 49.4%	(GY 2011) 49.5%	(GY 2012) 63.5%	

G9 Algebra I	% students Passing District End-of-Year Algebra 1 Assessment by the end of 9th grade	65.6%	50.4%		26.6%	
G9 On Track	% First-time G9 earning at least 6 credits (D- or better)		94.3%	93.7%	90.7%	
Freshman Failures	% G9 with Any Final Course Grade of D or F	53.1%	32.5%	38.0%	36.3%	
G9-10 Language Arts	% Students Scoring Goal on End-of-Year Performance Tasks			new	88.3%	
G11 Algebra II	% G11 Students Passing Algebra II by end of G11 (C- or better)	63.4%	62.5%	64.5%	76.6%	
G11 Chemistry	% G11 Students Passing Chemistry by end of G11 (C- or better)	56.6%	73.9%	80.8%	85.1%	
Final Course Grade of Ds or Fs	% G10-12 with Any Final Course Grade of D or F	52.6%	43.5%	38.8%	32.0%	
PSAT	Percent G10 meeting College Board Benchmark (October)	12.0%	11.8%	20.1%	19.1%	
SAT	Percent G11 meeting College Board Benchmark (Spring)			16.2%	14.6%	

Attendance Rate	% Days Attended of Days Enrolled	91.1%	91.1%	92.5%	92.0%	
Chronic Absenteeism	% Students Missing 10% or more Days Enrolled	30.3%	25.6%	20.4%	28.3%	
Suspension Rate	Average # Suspensions per Student	0.08	0.07	0.07	0.04	
Students with Any Suspensions	% Students with 1 or more Suspension	6.5%	5.9%	5.3%	3.1%	

Magnet Applications	9th grade applications (TBD for future reports)					
Teacher Attendance	Based on absences reported to Aesop system (under development)				98.2%	
Student Survey	% Favorable on all questions (older years have different metric)	6.9	7.3	60.4%	64.0%	
Parent Survey	% Favorable on all questions (older years have different metric)	7.4	7.7	76.6%	78.0%	
Teacher Survey	% Favorable on all questions (older years have different metric)	6.5	7.0	71.2%	73.0%	

ELL	% of school population	1.6%	1.8%	2.2%	2.5%	
SPED	% of school population	6.9%	7.5%	7.8%	9.8%	
Free Lunch	% of school population	66.1%	68.5%	74.1%	53.9%	
Transience	transfers in after Oct 1 as % of Oct 1 population	0.8%	0.0%	0.5%	1.3%	
Per Student Resources	TBD Based on ERS Work					

Measure 1	TBD through shared accountability and support process					
Measure 2	TBD through shared accountability and support process					

For future refinement

### Priority Area: School Portfolio Supports

*Support each school on its own unique path to success by encouraging the development of high quality school teams, providing appropriate and equitable supports to schools, and enabling effective decision-making at the school level.*

To move this priority forward during the 2014-2015 school year, there are four key areas that will be a focus. There will be cross-functional working committees for each focus area, in addition to various feedback loops to ensure engagement of stakeholders throughout the district and community.

<b>Focus Area</b>	School Improvement Planning Process
<b>Coordinators</b>	Damaris Rau and Kelly Kovacic
<p><b>Charge:</b></p> <p>In a district with high-quality teachers and principals, the role of the central office should be to guide, support and hold schools accountable. The work of the central office should be designed around the work of schools, ensuring that principals, faculty and staff have support and resources to meet the needs of their students.</p> <p>The SIP initiative will involve reviewing and revising the process by which schools develop, refine and receive feedback on a clearly articulated School Improvement Plan (SIP) that defines the school's own unique path to success. This working committee will collaborate to design systems and tools that will best organize and support schools in successfully implementing their SIPs and cycles of continuous improvement.</p>	
<b>Issues and/or questions this working group is going to need to consider and confront?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do we align the school improvement planning process with the revised school budgeting, shared accountability framework and state accountability framework?</li> <li>• What supports will schools need to be able to support this planning process and move towards viewing the SIP as a compliance document and instead use it as a chance to strategically plan and establish (or strengthen) inquiry cycles?</li> <li>• How do we support members of central office to become more comfortable and capable working with schools on strategic planning and inquiry cycles?</li> <li>• If SIPs are to be a driver of school improvement, in what ways does this process need to connect with other district initiatives and systems? In addition, how do we use the SIP process to inform other initiatives aimed at improving support for schools based on their unique needs?</li> </ul>



MEETING AGENDA January 22, 2015, 9:00—11:00 a.m. Location: 2 <sup>nd</sup> Floor Board Room			
Performance & Learning Review: School Portfolio Supports		Facilitation: Damaris Rau, Kelly Kovacic, Iline Tracey, Kim Johnsky	
Topic: School Improvement Planning			
Meeting objectives:			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Share draft School Improvement Planning (SIP) process and tools</li><li>• Gather feedback on the SIP process and tools</li><li>• Determine supports schools will need to use the SIP process effectively</li></ul>			
Schedule [120 minutes]			
Time	Minutes	Activity	
9:00—9:25	25 min	<b>Welcome, Objectives, and Framing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Welcome and Overview</li><li>• SIP Process Rationale and Principles</li></ul>	
9:30—9:55	20 min	<b>Feedback on the SIP Process</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Share Overview of the SIP Process<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 5 minute of individual writing</li><li>○ Small group review and conversation</li></ul></li><li>• Brief report-out</li></ul>	
9:55—10:20	25 min	<b>Feedback on the Template: Needs Assessment, Strategic Objectives and Initiatives</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Review Needs Assessment, Strategic Objectives and Initiatives</li><li>• Clarifying questions (10 minutes)</li><li>• Brief report-out</li></ul>	
10:20—10:50	30 min	<b>Data Analysis Activity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Review freshman pass/failure rate for quarter 1</li><li>• Data Analysis Protocol</li></ul>	
10:50—11:00	10 min	<b>Review next steps from this meeting</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Assess what worked well about this meeting and what we would like to change for next time</li></ul>	
		What Worked Well	Even Better If
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•</li></ul>

<b>SCHOOL NAME:</b>	<b>PRINCIPAL:</b>	<b>DATE:</b>
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### School Improvement Plan (SIP) 2015-2017

New Haven Public Schools seeks to engage all schools in the district in collaborative cultures of data-informed decision-making with the aim of improving student learning. The purpose of the School Improvement Plan is to support schools in:

- 1) Using an inquiry process to examine quantitative and qualitative data to identify and prioritize needs,
- 2) Developing a few high-leverage strategic objectives that will drive a coherent plan of work,
- 3) Identifying a limited set of strategic initiatives within each objective that will lead to improved student learning
- 4) Developing a set of actions for achieving the strategic initiatives, and
- 5) Creating a plan to measure progress and impact against collaboratively-identified benchmarks.



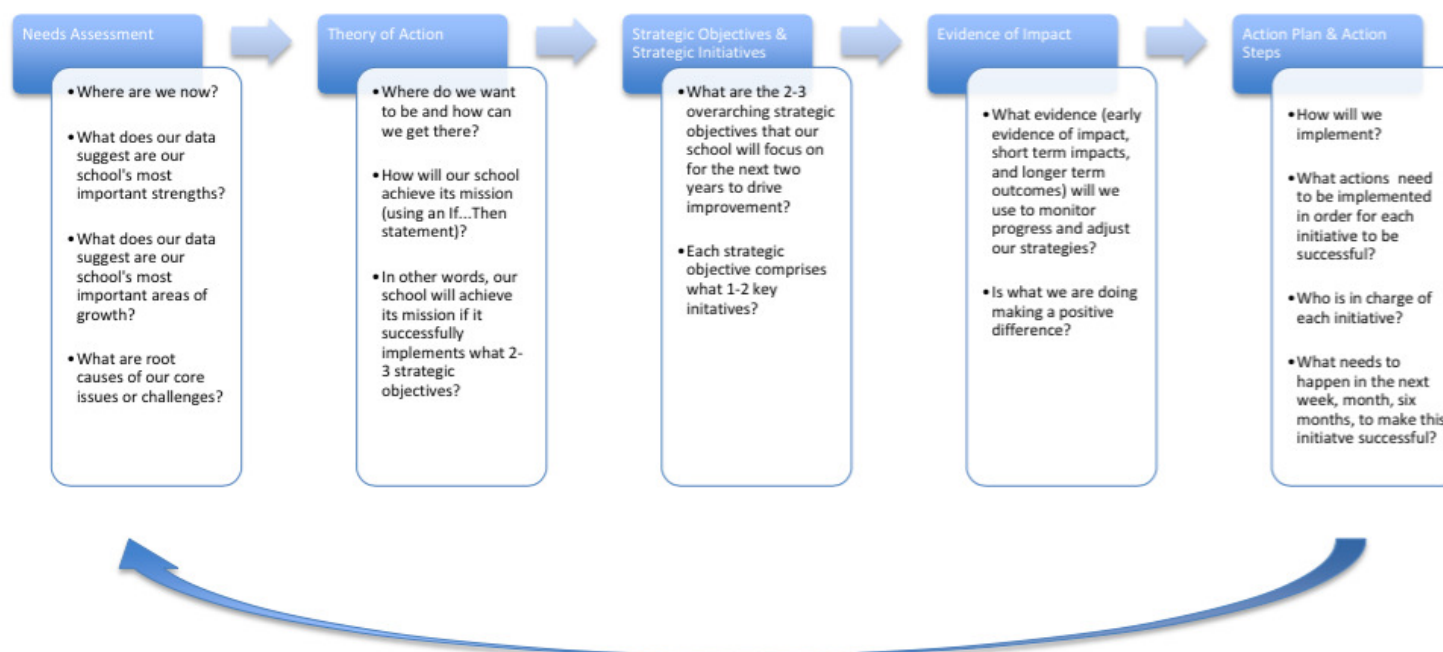
While the School Improvement Plan document is due September 15, 2015, schools will be encouraged to revise/add to the plan as needed along the way (strategic objectives, strategic initiatives, action plan, plans to assess progress). This should not be viewed as a static document, but rather an ongoing effort to document and encourage continuous learning and improvement at the school level.

School Improvement Planning Timeline		
CYCLE OF PLAN-ACT-ASSESS		
Due Date	Section	Feedback Provided By
April 1 - 20, 2015	In collaboration with your school team and central office support, complete SIP Section 1 (needs assessment)	April 15 – May 11, 2015
April 20 – May 15, 2015	In collaboration with your school team and central office support, complete Section 2 (Theory of Action, Core Values, 1-3 intended Strategic Objectives)	May 11 – June 5, 2015
May 15 - June 10, 2015	In collaboration with your school team and central office support, complete Strategic Initiatives, Early Evidence of Impact, Short Term Evidence of Impact, Annual Outcomes and Long Term Outcomes (first part of Section 3)	June 30, 2015
September 15, 2015	In collaboration with your school team and central office support, complete Action Steps. <b>Turn in completed School Improvement Plan</b>	September 30, 2015
September - Ongoing	Analyze your school's progress towards the early evidence and short term evidence of impact identified in your Action Plan and revise Action Plan as needed.	Ongoing
February – March 2016	Mid-year school self-review	February - March 2016



## OVERVIEW OF THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANNING PROCESS

The recommended steps to be taken during the development and implementation of a school improvement plan mirror the steps of a cycle of continuous improvement and the NHPS collective responsibility framework of **Plan-Act-Assess**. The goal is that the school improvement plan is a vital part of an ongoing process of reflection and refinement of educational practice that will lead to substantial and ongoing student learning gains. The phases include:



## SECTION 1: NEEDS ASSESSMENT

### SECTION 1, PART 1: SCHOOL STRENGTHS

Step #1: Review school <b>trend data</b> and identify up to 5 of the school's greatest strengths. List these strengths below, citing specific data points.	Step #2 (Optional): Using a tool for school self-reflection (e.g. State Needs Assessment Audit tool, Global Best Practices tool, etc.), align strengths to particular indicators or dimensions of an effective school.	Step #3: Identify strategies, programs, or initiatives contributing to the strength. What are your <b>hypotheses</b> regarding what contributes to this as a strength?
	Indicator	
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		

### SECTION 1, PART 2: SCHOOL GROWTH AREAS

Step #1: Review school <b>trend data</b> and identify up to 5 of the school's most significant growth areas. List these growth areas below, citing specific data points.	Step #2 (Optional): Using a tool for school self-reflection (e.g. State Needs Assessment Audit tool, Global Best Practices tool, etc.), align growth areas to particular indicators or dimensions of an effective school.	Step #3: What are the <b>root causes</b> of this growth area? Specifically, what factors contribute or lead to the school's challenges in this area?
	Indicator	
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		



## SECTION 2: SCHOOL VISION, CORE VALUES AND THEORY OF ACTION

### VISION STATEMENT

*Where are we going? Describes in clear, compelling terms the preferred future reality of what the school must become to help all students learn.*

### CORE VALUES

*How do we travel? The values that underlie our work, how we interact with each other, and which strategies we employ to fulfill our vision*

### THEORY OF ACTION

*What is our path? The beliefs and assumptions we hold about why certain actions will lead to the vision we seek. Framed as an "if...then" statement.*

### INTENDED STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

*The coherent group of overarching goals and key levers for improvement that will achieve the vision.*

## SECTION 3: STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES, STRATEGIC INITIATIVES & ACTION STEPS

### Guidelines

Each school will complete the Action Plan Template below for 2-3 strategic objectives.

- The strategic objectives may be decided based on your school's unique needs and your analysis of data.
- The strategic initiatives should lead to substantial gains in student learning.
- Strategic initiatives and action plans should take into consideration gap closure for sub-group populations (e.g. special needs, ELL, etc.).
- Please feel free to add a page for additional details or definitions of terms/acronyms.

**Step #1:** In collaboration with your school's leadership team and school committees, identify the 2-3 strategic objectives that your school will focus on in the next two years to drive improvement.

**Step #2:** Identify 1-3 strategic initiatives that the school will implement to achieve the desired outcomes. Specifically, what strategies will the school employ to achieve its objectives?

**Step #3:** Identify the expected long-term outcomes. Link each initiative to quantifiable early evidence of impact. How will the school monitor the impact of its initiatives and action steps?

**Step #4:** Determine a set of action steps.

- Identify an owner or lead. Who will be responsible for leading the implementation of the action step and monitoring early evidence of impact?
- Identify the resources required for successful implementation (e.g., staffing, training, technology, funding, materials).
- Identify the timeframe for each action step. When will the school team review evidence of progress?

Element	Definition
<b>Strategic Objectives</b>	The coherent group of overarching goals and key levers for improvement that will achieve the vision.
<b>Strategic Initiatives</b>	The projects and programs that support and will achieve the strategic objectives and lead to substantial gains in student learning.
<b>Long Term Outcomes</b>	The expected results at the end of two years: what they will be, how they will be measured, when they will occur. For example, in Year 2, reduce the Algebra I achievement gap for English language learners by 25% as measured by the end of year proficiency exam.
<b>Evidence of Impact</b>	Identify changes you should begin to see if the plan is having its desired impact while being implemented. Early evidence of impact are indicators of effective implementation rather than measurements of interim results. Early evidence of impact might include changes in practice or attitude from sources such as classroom observation or surveys. For example, an increase in student use of oral language was observed in 80% of these ESL teachers' classrooms between October and May.

<b>Strategic Objective #1</b>			
<b>Which district goal(s) does this strategic objective align to?</b>			
<b>Initiative #1</b>			
<b>Long Term Outcomes (after year 2)</b>			
<b>Early Evidence of Impact (monthly):</b>	<b>Short Term Evidence of Impact (quarterly):</b>	<b>Annual Outcomes (after Year 1):</b>	
<b>Year 1 Action Steps</b>	<b>Lead</b>	<b>Resource Requirements</b>	<b>Completion Date</b>
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			



Year 2 Anticipated Action Steps Strategic Objective # 1	
Strategic Initiative	Anticipated Action Steps



## FOCUSED PLANNING TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING

### SCHOOL GUIDE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANS

#### Introduction and Overview

New Haven Public Schools (NHPS) seeks to engage all schools in processes to foster collaborative cultures for decision-making with the aim of improving student learning. This guide provides support to NHPS schools in their efforts to improve learning outcomes for all students through the development of a focused, actionable, and sustainable School Improvement Plan (SIP).

The document provides schools with guidance and a structure for organizing and managing the process to identify complex school needs and create the conditions necessary to accelerate and sustain improvements in student learning. The **theory of action** that underlies this guidance is that *if* a school can **define a narrow set of strategic objectives** to accelerate student learning, **execute well-defined initiatives** with a persistent focus on implementation, and **systematically monitor the impact of those initiatives** to inform midcourse corrections, *then* outcomes for students will improve dramatically. The purpose of the SIP is to support schools in:

- Using an inquiry process to examine quantitative and qualitative data to identify and prioritize needs,
- Developing a few high-leverage strategic objectives that will drive a coherent plan of work,
- Identifying a limited set of strategic initiatives within each objective that will improve student learning
- Developing a set of actions for achieving the strategic initiatives, and
- Creating a plan to measure progress and impact against collaboratively-identified benchmarks.

Schools are encouraged to revise/add to the plan as needed along the way (strategic objectives, strategic initiatives, action plan, plans to assess progress). The plan should not be viewed as a static document, but rather an ongoing effort to document and encourage continuous learning and improvement at the school level.

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## NHPS Goals and Priorities

New Haven School Change recognizes that improving schools is an ambitious and important undertaking, and we cannot rely on a “one size fits all” approach to advance individual school and student outcomes. Our work is designed to be comprehensive, collaborative, and persistent, with a sharp focus on preparing all students for success in college, careers, and life. We measure our school and district progress against three goals:

- 1 Every student should launch from NHPS to success in college, career, and life. Over the next five years, we will strive to increase successful enrollment in a confirmed post-secondary (i.e. after high school) education, so that second year college enrollment rises to 50% of our cohort, and with two thirds of our cohort successfully and on-track into college, the military, or a confirmed employment apprenticeship.
- 2 Every student must graduate from High School: over the next five years, we will strive to raise the 4 year graduation rate still further to 85%, and with 95% of students earning a high school diploma or a GED within 6 years.
- 3 At every stage of K-12 education, students should be prepared for success at the next level. This includes functional reading by the end of first grade; grade-level reading, writing, and math at the end of middle school; high school transcripts that reflect on-track mastery of core course subjects; and post-secondary readiness on standardized assessments, including the PSAT/SAT and other instruments.

In pursuing these goals, we are tackling a challenge that no urban school system in the country has fully solved. We aspire to successfully engage students in purposeful, supportive, and meaningful instruction, including all types of students and in all types of schools. The district has identified **Six Priority Areas** through which it is working to develop systems and provide the tools, processes, and resources schools need to serve children and their families better than ever before.

- **Academic Learning Systems:** Deepen academic learning systems to start and keep students on the right path.
- **Social-Emotional and Physical Learning Systems:** Build social emotional and physical learning systems that address demonstrated challenges for students and schools.
- **School Portfolio Supports:** Continue development of New Haven School Portfolio through both the redesign of schools and enhanced school support
- **Talent:** Manage staff as professionals so we attract, develop, and retain the highest quality educators
- **Community Partnerships:** Create deep partnerships with parents and the community, including leveraging community resources and partnerships, to best support student needs.
- **Strategic Infrastructure:** Provide efficient, equitable and transparent infrastructure supports with strong fiscal stewardship and management practices.

Schools should define strategic objectives and goals that are organized around improving student learning and connect to the three overarching district goals. We recommend that schools review their **Balanced Progress Reports and other relevant school level data** when conducting their needs assessment and setting goals. These measures are intended to inform conversations between schools and the district about growth and improvement over time.

### Collective Responsibility for Growth: Balancing Coherence and Flexibility

New Haven schools and central office staff are committed to two “Both/And” principles:

The district can best support schools in our collective mission to improve student learning by developing a **coherent system** of support and collective responsibility that enables effective decision-making at the school level and builds capacity across all schools to advance teaching and learning in every classroom.



Each school should be supported in determining its own **unique path to improving student learning** based on its specific strengths and areas of growth.

With good communication and shared goals at all levels, these two principles complement and reinforce one another. In consultation with school leaders and teachers, the district identifies system-wide needs and pursues district-wide initiatives and policies. While each school will have a SIP that defines its strategic objectives and initiatives as a school, there are common strands of learning that run across the entire district.

Through the SIP process, schools identify their specific needs and design school-level initiatives, approaches, and programs that meet unique school needs and goals. Conversely, all district staff must honor and support school-level priorities in order to provide our students with the highest quality of teaching and learning possible (see *Appendix A* for the strategic initiatives within each priority area). Further, teachers and administrators are encouraged to consider aligning at least one of their **development and evaluation goals** to their school improvement plan.

A key tenet of the New Haven School Change Initiative is engagement around continuous improvement. The planning process provides an opportunity to engage the school community – teachers, administrators, staff, families, students, and community partners – in the process of school improvement, as well as the opportunity to collaboratively plan and implement initiatives that will engage all learners. Engagement is the foundation of learning and growth, for students, adults, and the district as a whole.

#### Guiding Principles for School Planning

- **Deep and Intentional:** Focus on a **few** overarching objectives. Target identified needs and the instructional core.
- **Coherent:** Develop a **coherent and focused** set of strategies and initiatives specific to supporting the school's own unique path to success.
- **Collective Responsibility:** Enable and support **cross-functional collaboration** and take **collective responsibility**.
- **Dynamic:** Use evidence at interim checkpoints to assess progress. Adjust in a **dynamic process** in light of new learning, experience and interim results.
- **Monitor the plan:** Identify and support implementation and monitoring of progress.

## Developing the SIP

Schools can develop and follow their own processes for designing their SIP. School leaders may want to consider how best to solicit input from school stakeholders during the needs assessment and planning stages of the work. Broad participation can help ensure that plans address the school's top priorities and root causes of school challenges, while also ensuring staff are committed to full implementation of the plan's strategies. Below are some ideas school leaders can draw on in designing their plan.



- Form a sub-committee with representative school stakeholders to lead the SIP effort (e.g., the SPMT, ILT or BLDT, or other school governance teams).
- Share the process for developing the SIP at a staff meeting or meetings, and use a structured process for soliciting staff input regarding core issues, root causes, and promising strategic initiatives.
- Host community events to engage the broader school community, including parents and students as appropriate, in the school's improvement planning process.
- Send members of the SIP writing team to district SIP school leadership workshops.
- Collaborate with other school implementing promising practices or grappling with similar challenges.
- Consult with district support staff, including your director of instruction and curriculum supervisors.

By engaging staff and the broader community in the school improvement planning process, schools have the opportunity to develop **collective ownership** of their overall improvement strategy and a broad spectrum of **distributed leadership**, key components of sustaining improvement over time. The chart below outlines planning modules, which will be offered by the district for core school SIP planning teams. Core school teams will receive resources and planning tools to bring back to their schools to continue the planning process. The district central office will provide more information regarding the dates and locations of these central training and planning sessions. Numerous planning and resources are also saved on a google drive, accessible using the [following link](#).

Planning Module:	Description:
Needs Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthen understanding of a needs assessment process and root cause analysis.</li> <li>• School teams prepare to conduct a needs assessments.</li> </ul>
Strategic Objectives, Strategic Initiatives & Theory of Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop shared understanding of strategic objectives, strategic initiatives, and theory of action.</li> <li>• Support school teams in developing these components</li> </ul>
Evidence of Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop shared understanding of early evidence of impact, short-term, and annual evidence of impact.</li> <li>• Support school teams in beginning to develop evidence of impact</li> </ul>
Putting It Together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address remaining questions and provide feedback to support the planning process by school teams.</li> </ul>



## Continuous Improvement Cycle

The SIP development process is central to school improvement; however, it represents one step in a cyclical process designed to promote continuous improvement and data-driven decision-making. As schools develop SIPs, teams will (1) identify school strengths and growth areas; (2) select a manageable set of strategic objectives and initiatives; (3) determine metrics to measure short- and long-term impact; and (4) develop action plans. After developing a SIP, school teams will initiate the all-important implementation phase. School communities will work together to implement SIPs with fidelity, monitor progress, and apply midcourse corrections, as necessary.



## SIP Components

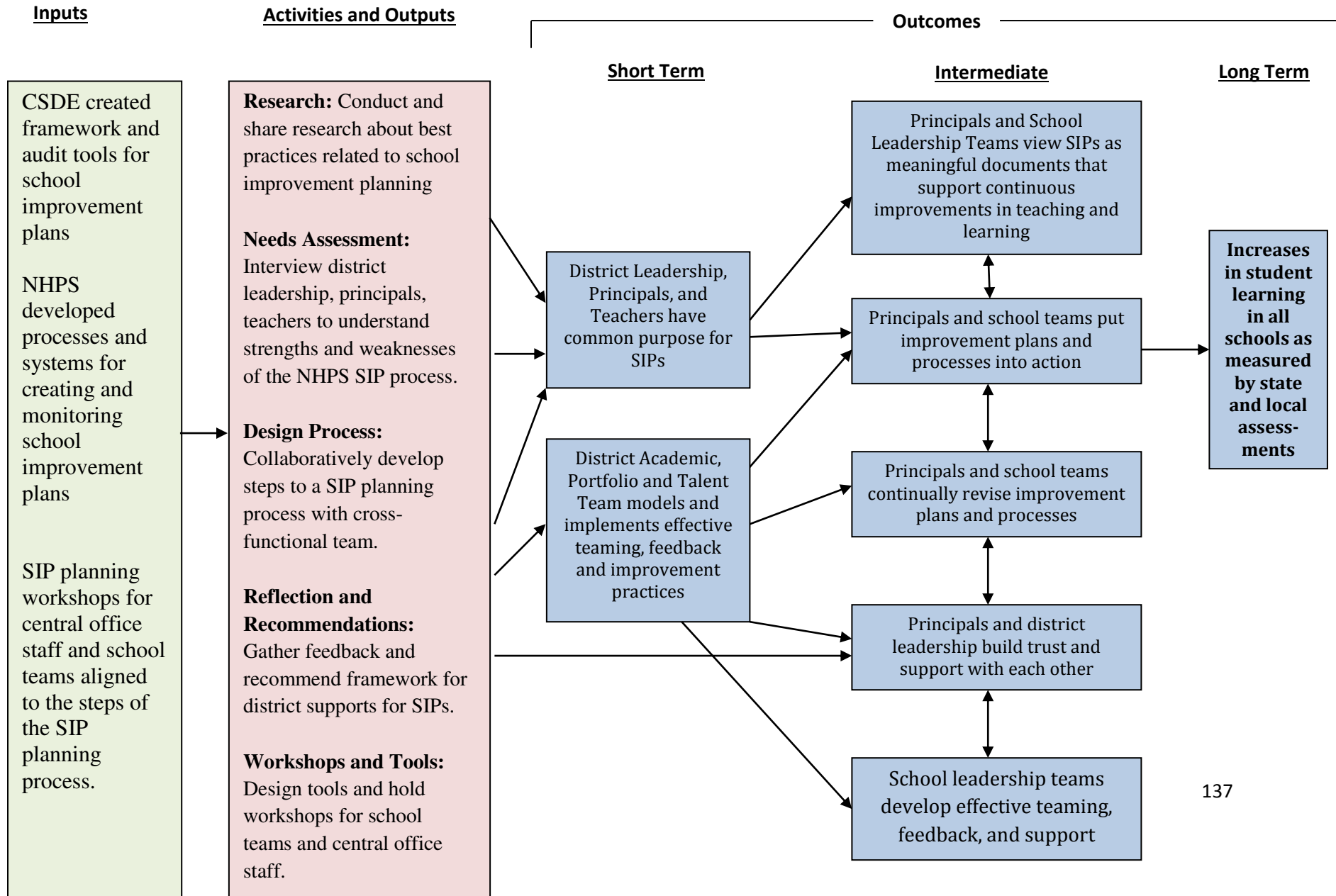
Element:	Definition:
<b>Vision</b>	<b>Where are we going?</b> Describes in clear, compelling terms the preferred future reality of what the school must become to help all students learn.
<b>Core Values</b>	<b>How do we travel?</b> The values that underlie our work, how we interact with each other, and which strategies we employ to fulfill our vision.
<i>The beliefs and assumptions you hold about why certain actions will lead to the vision you seek, creating a foundation for...</i>	
<b>Theory of Action</b>	<b>What is our path?</b> Beliefs and assumptions you hold about why certain actions will lead to the vision you seek. Framed as an "if...then" statement.
<i>Which leads to the development of the...</i>	
<b>Strategic Objectives</b>	Coherent group of overarching goals and key levers for improvement that will achieve the vision.
<i>Which will be achieved by the...</i>	
<b>Strategic Initiatives</b>	Projects and programs that support and will achieve the strategic objectives.
<i>For which you set...</i>	
<b>Outcomes and Evidence of Impact</b>	<p>The expected results, how they will be measured, when they will occur. Outcomes are SMART goals: specific and strategic; measurable; action-oriented; rigorous, realistic, results-focused; timed and tracked.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Long-term outcomes</b> set targets for the end of plan implementation. For example, in Year 2, reduce the achievement gap for English language learners by 25% as measured by ...</li> <li>▪ <b>Annual and short-term outcomes and evidence of impact</b> set targets for improvement during plan implementation.</li> <li>▪ <b>Early evidence of impact benchmarks</b> identify changes you should begin to see if the plan is having its desired impact while being implemented. Early evidence of impact benchmarks are indicators of effective implementation rather than measurements of interim results. Early evidence benchmarks might include changes in practice or attitude (e.g., classroom observation or surveys), or changes in student behavior (e.g., student use of oral language in ESL classrooms).</li> <li>▪ <b>Process benchmarks</b> specify what will happen, who will do it, and when. For example, 20 teachers will take part in a particular professional learning opportunity by June.</li> </ul>
<i>Which you consistently monitor and use as indicators for assessing whether the plan is on track to achieve desired change, or requires adjustment.</i>	

Appendix I: SIP Work Plan – Updated as of February 2015

	Milestone	Deadline	Notes/Status
	Hold 3 round-table meetings (by region) with Principals and Curriculum Supervisors to elicit feedback about the school improvement planning process.	October – December 2014	
	Develop goals for the initiative and outline logic model with outcomes	December 15, 2014	Partly done – Kelly completed logic model, while team worked together to determine goals and major objectives for the initiative.
	Write theory of action and outline phases to a focused strategic planning process for schools.	January 3, 2015	
	Finalize the school improvement planning template for 2015-2016	January 10, 2015	Coordinate and collaborate Cambridge Education.
	Gather feedback from school leaders at January P&L Review meeting. Share framework for SIP and guiding principles outlined by team and informed by feedback.	January 2015	
	Create agenda to introduce school action planning template and process to school principals at the February 11, 2015 Superintendent Meeting. Facilitate workshop for Principals, recognizing differentiated sets of support that will be required.	February 11, 2015	
	Create protocol to use with schools to discuss school level trend data that will inform their SIP. Share with Directors/Academics and receive feedback. Iterate, if necessary.	January 25, 2015	Off track – Completed in March as part of the Needs Assessment workshop.
	Finalize rubric to use when providing feedback on the SIP.	February 8, 2015	NOT DONE – off track
	Hold pre-planning workshop sessions with School Leadership Teams and central office teams (e.g. Directors of Instruction, Supervisors)	January 2015 – April 2015	
	Feedback Loop: School leadership teams using a feedback SIP rubric engage in a collaborative process and workshops with fellow schools to receive and provide feedback on SIP strategies and goals.	April - June 2015	Modified and collapsed with milestone above. Workshops scheduled to be held for school teams and for central office staff on all phases of the SIP planning process.

Appendix I: SIP Work Plan – Updated as of February 2015

	<b>Milestone</b>	<b>Deadline</b>	<b>Notes/Status</b>
	All schools receive feedback from a member of the Central Office Support team using the feedback SIP rubric	June 1, 2015 – June 30, 2015	
	Revised SIP plans due to the district	September 15, 2015	
	School Improvement Plans are reviewed and approved by Directors of Instruction	September 15, 2015 – September 30, 2015	





<b>FEEDBACK SUMMARY: HIGH-LEVEL THEMES</b> <b>January 22, 2015, 9:00—11:00 a.m.</b> <b>Location: 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor Board Room</b>	
<b>Performance &amp; Learning Review: School Portfolio Supports</b> <b>Topic: School Improvement Planning</b>	
<b>Meeting objectives:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share draft School Improvement Planning (SIP) process and tools</li> <li>• Gather feedback on the school improvement planning process and tools</li> <li>• Discuss possible challenges in school improvement planning and determine supports schools may need</li> </ul>	
<b>SUMMARY OF MAJOR FEEDBACK THEMES</b>	
<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Questions, Challenges and Supports Needed</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Including a Theory of Action, which helps schools articulate where we want to be and how we will get there.</li> <li>• Narrowing of objectives; value of broader objectives</li> <li>• Including Short-term and long-term impacts, rather than just focusing on longer term outcomes.</li> <li>• The emphasis of the process being ongoing, dynamic, and living document</li> <li>• School autonomy</li> <li>• Self-assessment rubric</li> <li>• Focus on root causes</li> <li>• More opportunities for data collection throughout the year</li> <li>• Plays to collective responsibility and accountability</li> <li>• Use of qualitative data</li> <li>• Importance of vision</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completion timeline - feels slightly too ambitious. Can we push the due dates back?</li> <li>• Is it a real life document?</li> <li>• How can we build thought partners into this process – getting feedback from colleagues in other schools and in central office?</li> <li>• This is a mind-shift regarding schools choosing their own challenges</li> <li>• Embracing theory of action means embracing flexibility</li> <li>• Timely access to resources seems critical.</li> <li>• What is the difference between theory of action and strategies?</li> <li>• How does this process align with other reports we are responsible for completing?</li> <li>• Extent of accountable district support</li> <li>• Unique measures require unique measurement                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Desire to know more about the process for schools defining own measures</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If simple electronic document, we could make this a usable living document (Google doc?)</li> <li>• A focus on monitoring and adjusting strategies</li> <li>• Effort to connect central office supports to schools</li> <li>• An actual process to create a plan</li> <li>• Is coming before end of year</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Room for risk, especially around unique, school-level measures</li> <li>• What are the non-negotiables?</li> <li>• Maintaining conversation around high-quality curriculum and instruction</li> <li>• Placing students at the center a la 4 ovals; where are students in the process?</li> <li>• Alignment with TEVAL and PEVAL?</li> <li>• Alignment with central office team: understanding of school-level measures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ All central office staff familiar with school objectives</li> <li>○ Ongoing conversation</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Request for Talent Ed training</li> <li>• How do we get feedback from the entire staff, not just the planning team?</li> <li>• Who is the district point person on this? Whom should we call?</li> <li>• Clarity regarding how the district will really determine if a school is doing a good job</li> <li>• Master schedules for high schools</li> <li>• Alignment with budget</li> <li>• Add a quarterly check-in</li> <li>• Provide training and support for facilitators of P&amp;L Review small group discussions.</li> </ul>
<b>IMMEDIATE NEXT STEPS</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>January 26 – February 11:</b> Make necessary adjustments to the school improvement planning document and process using the feedback received. Adjust the timeline in response to feedback about it feeling slightly too rushed.</li> </ul>	

- **February 11, 2015:** At the Superintendent's meeting, the school improvement planning process will be shared with all principals.
- **February 2015 – May 2015:** Hold workshops for school teams, administrators and central office staff to support the school improvement planning process. Workshops will be held to support each step in the planning process.
- **February 2015 – May 2015:** Begin to examine the feedback systems between schools and central office, with a focus on aligning feedback and supports to schools.

## Appendix L: Feedback from January 2015 Superintendent's Meeting

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I felt that the meeting was well organized and the main points were well covered and clarified.	48%	48%	3%	0%
I felt the information presented was relevant and purposeful.	48%	50%	1%	0%
I felt the format of the meeting was engaging and a meaningful use of time.	44%	48%	8%	0%
I felt the materials provided were useful.	40%	56%	4%	0%

### Which aspects of the meeting did you find most interesting or valuable?

- The portion where we had a facilitator lead the discussion questions about their SIP. I had many take aways from our group discussion.
- The way the presentation was broken up with assigned facilitators already at the tables made the discussion portion run smoother. There was little discussion on logistics and I feel like the facilitators genuinely wanted to get feedback back to central office
- Working in collaborative groups
- I felt the input from my more experienced colleagues was a great help. Our facilitator was excellent!!
- I enjoyed having the opportunity to have organic conversations with those who I may not necessary work with all of the time.



## Appendix L: Feedback from January 2015 Superintendent's Meeting

- Going over the new SIP format was valuable. The conversation with colleagues was also valuable.
- The most valuable aspects of the meeting were the moments administrators were able to share with their colleagues.

### **In what ways could the meeting have been improved?**

- I did not care for us working on a plan and then have the plan which was already done given to us at the end.
- To have presented the non-negotiables.
- Time should have been provided for questions/ concerns about this new format and possible answers that Central Office will provide to address those concerns.
- Time should have been provided for questions/ concerns about this new format and possible answers that Central Office will provide to address those concerns.
- More time for discussion; clarification. The workshops will be a big support
- If the message in the end was that it is what it is, why have us spend 1 1/2 hours giving feedback? We should have just been given the document and allowed to react to it.
- If we would have gotten a completed SIP as it should be when finalized. The instructions are good but having an exemplar would help.
- N/A...great job!
- There should have been more time to really look at the actual SIP with colleagues and ask the Leadership questions.  
Reviewing the theory behind developing SIPs and the leadership qualities is more suited for newly appointed administrators.
- I thought the pace was good and it was a very useful use of our time.
- Principal contribution to the timeline.
- More time to discussion with our colleagues.
- During the share-out and in the end, I think it is important for facilitators/leaders of discussion to take the opportunity to highlight the connections to other work and priorities for the whole group.

### **What additional information or supports will be helpful?**

- Going over the new SIP format was valuable. The conversation with colleagues was also valuable.
- If we would have gotten a completed SIP as it should be when finalized. The instructions are good but having an exemplar would help.
- Copies and/or links to the self-assessment tools made available at the meeting.
- Focusing on interpreting data to determine the core issues to therefore inform the theory of action.

## Appendix L: Feedback from January 2015 Superintendent's Meeting

- Workshops pertaining to the selection of metrics that will adequately measure adult actions. Workshops that will provide training to identify and use systems to easily capture and assess the data that will be used to determine the effectiveness of the adult actions.
- Clear information about the district "non-negotiables"
- Time for school teams with common goals to come together to plan and share effective strategies.
- There was no data presented at the meeting as in past meetings. It would have been helpful to discuss data points given the new testing (SBAC, DSA, ORF)...what assessments tell what story.
- Sample district improvement plan or at least the "non-negotiable" for which each school will be held accountable.
- Copies of and/or links to the self-assessment tools. Sample hypotheses statement

## NHPS School Improvement Planning Process: Workshops



By engaging staff and the broader community in the school improvement planning process, schools have the opportunity to develop collective ownership of their overall improvement strategy and a broad spectrum of distributed leadership, key components of sustaining improvement over time. To support school teams in the development of their school improvement plans, the following workshops will be offered by the district for core school SIP planning teams. School teams will receive resources and planning tools to bring back to their schools to continue the planning process.

Focus	Session	Session Objective	Participants	Date
1. Needs Assessment	School Leadership Workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthen understanding of NHPS needs assessment process and root cause analysis.</li> <li>Prepare to conduct needs assessments in each school.</li> </ul>	Principals/APs/school leadership teams	<b>March 23</b> (1:00 – 3:00)  <b>March 24</b> (3:30 – 5:30 pm)
2: Strategic Objectives, Strategic Initiative & Theory of Action	School Leadership Workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop shared understanding of strategic objectives, strategic initiatives, and theory of action.</li> <li>Begin developing these components for each school.</li> </ul>	Principals/APs/school leadership teams	<b>April 21</b> (2:00 – 4:00)  <b>April 28</b> (3:00 – 5:00)
3: Evidence of Impact	School Leadership Workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop shared understanding of early evidence of impact, short-term, and annual evidence of impact.</li> <li>Begin developing evidence of impact for each school</li> </ul>	Principals/APs/school leadership teams	<b>May 19, 2015</b> (2:00 – 4:00 pm)  <b>May 26, 2015</b> (3:00 – 5:00 pm)
4: Putting It Together	School Leadership Workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Address remaining issues and check plans for coherence</li> <li>Complete summary sheet</li> </ul>	Principals/APs/school leadership teams	<b>June 3, 2015</b> (2:00 – 4:00 pm)  <b>June 8, 2015</b> (3:00 – 5:00 pm)



Stakeholder	Interests	Communication Approach
<b>Principals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure positive impact on students</li> <li>• Aligned to other initiatives and mandates they are being asked to comply with</li> <li>• Support: how will school team be supported in implementing this initiative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduced strategy with a clear tie to other district initiatives and the overall goals of School Change 2.0</li> <li>• Developed Google Drive with resources and tools for principals and school leadership teams to use when going through the planning process</li> <li>• Developed and held workshops on the different stages of the SIP process</li> <li>• In our weekly newsletter to principals, included updates and links to new tools, resources and guidance documents</li> </ul>
<b>Teachers Union</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure union rules are followed</li> <li>• Ensure the strategy respects teachers and supports the broader talent initiative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Met with union president to inform him about the school improvement initiative and its greater goals for school improvement</li> <li>• Invited the union executive board to the January P&amp;L Review meeting and worked with the Vice President of the union to chose teachers he thought should be in the room to give feedback</li> </ul>
<b>Senior Leadership Team</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure the initiative supports or does not interfere with the work they are leading</li> <li>• Understand the implications of this strategy on their work</li> <li>• Ensure positive impact on students and schools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Form cross-functional team that develops the strategy collectively and is able to share with their department members and discuss implications of strategy for their department's work</li> <li>• Regularly met with cross-functional team to develop the SIP process and sent regular email updates.</li> <li>• Established google folder to store tools and resources. Add resources to the google folder and the guidance document from other departments.</li> </ul>
<b>Central Office Staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand the implications of this strategy on their work</li> <li>• Have a voice in the creation or implementation of the strategy</li> <li>• Ensure positive impact on the work they are leading in support of school and student achievement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regularly communicate updates about the initiative via Leadership Connection and department specific emails</li> <li>• Set up 1-1 or department meetings with members of central office not on the cross-functional team to update them and think through ways to create links between work streams</li> <li>• Provide pre-planning workshops to gather feedback and provide training on components of the school improvement planning process</li> <li>• Be responsive to emails and questions that people have about the SIP process.</li> <li>• Reach out and engage members of central office as key players in the "central office support team" provided to schools</li> </ul>

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